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The Neglected Religion of Philip Clairmont

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment

of the requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Arts in Art History

in the

University of Canterbury

by

Sarah E Campbell

University of Canterbury 2000

Contents

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Abstract

Philip Clairmont (1949-1984) is discussed within New Zealand's art history as an expressionist. This was only one aspect of his oeuvre. Unfortunately, many critics and art historians have neglected the importance of religion and spirituality in Clairmont's work, which limits subsequent analysis. A scrutiny of selected examples addresses this oversight and provides an alternative interpretation which focuses on the significance of religion in Clairmont's imagery. Although he did not adhere to a particular belief system or doctrine, Clairmont did use the iconography of numerous religions to convey a myriad of personal and political concerns, often presented symbolically within the domestic interior. Initially, Clairmont's use of religion appears incompatible with his lifestyle which was shaped by drug use and involvement with hippy culture. On closer inspection however, Clairmont's interest in the seemingly secular theories of psychology, art history and drug culture reveals a strong spiritual component. Freudian psychoanalysis reinterpreted religious ideology: the unconscious, for example, shares many traits with the soul. Drug theory combined religious concepts such as transcendence and enlightenment with the unconscious. Via art history, Clairmont was exposed to a rich source of religious imagery, affecting his choice of subject matter. Religion, psychology, drug culture, and art appear diverse influences but were unified in the promotion of alternative realities which Clairmont experienced in the 1970s. In fact, Clairmont's belief in such an 'outsider view' lies at the core of his work. With the assistance of drugs and the language of symbolism, Clairmont hoped to reveal realms beyond everyday experience and to reflect his unconscious or possibly some supernatural force. The enduring preoccupation in New Zealand art with landscape and indigenous culture and spirituality has marginalised Clairmont's expressionist style. Appreciating the religious features in his work counters such marginalisation, challenges traditional perceptions of the artist, broadens the scope of analysis of his oeuvre, and enriches understandings of his imagery.

List of Illustrations

All works are by Philip Clairmont unless otherwise stated (copyright is held by the Clairmont estate). Page numbers refer to the text page immediately preceding the illustration.

Figures:

Chronology

1949

15th September: Philip Anthony Haines born in Nelson, to Thelma Nelson and Rex Brian Haines.

1963-1966

Attends Nelson College. Art teacher Irvine Major helps Philip gain enrolment in tertiary education.

1966

Philip Haines becomes Philip Clairmont (at Thelma's behest).

1967

Both Philip and Thelma move to Christchurch.
Attends School of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury.
Doris Lusk a formative influence during Clairmont's first year.

1968

Moves to 92c Riccarton Road, a house he shares with Fomison which gains notoriety for its parties.
Taught by Rudolf Gopas and William Sutton.
Begins experimentation with hallucinogenics.

1969

22nd March: Married Viki Hansen.
24th October: Melissa Phoebe born.
First group exhibition: *Student Arts Festival* at Otago University.
Offered membership with the Christchurch Group (which he accepts).

1970

Gains Diploma of Fine Arts (Honours).
First solo exhibition: *Clairmont* at Several Arts Gallery, Christchurch.
Also shows at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in Christchurch.

1971-1973

Lives at various addresses in Christchurch.
Exhibits in Auckland (New Vision Gallery, Barry Lett Galleries), Wellington (Bett-Duncan Studio Gallery), Christchurch (CSA Gallery, Robert McDougall Art Gallery), and Dunedin (Visual Arts Association).

1974

Moves to Waikanae, lives in a bach owned by Viki's parents.
Employed as a postman.
First overseas exhibition at the Holdsworth Gallery in Sydney.
Also exhibits in Auckland (New Vision Gallery), Wellington (Bett-Duncan Gallery) and Christchurch (CSA Gallery).

1975

Exhibits in Auckland (Barrington Gallery, New Vision Gallery), and Wanganui (Sarjeant Gallery).

1976

Exihibits in Auckland (Peter Webb Galleries, New Vision Gallery, Auckland City Art Gallery), Wellington (Elva Bett Gallery), Lower Hutt (Dowse Art Gallery), and Christchurch (CSA Gallery)

1977

Separates from Viki.
Moves to central Wellington.

Meets Rachel Power whilst in Auckland.
Numerous solo and group exhibitions in Auckland (Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland City Art Gallery), New Plymouth (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery), Palmerston North (Manawatu Art Gallery), Wellington (Elva Bett Gallery), Lower Hutt (Dowse Art Gallery), and Christchurch (CSA Gallery).

1978

Moves to Auckland, lives with Rachel Power.
Awarded Arts Council of New Zealand Grant.
Exhibits in Auckland (Peter Webb Galleries, Auckland City Art Gallery, Barry Lett Galleries, Denis Cohn Gallery), New Plymouth (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery), Wellington (Elva Bett Gallery) and Dunedin (Bosshard Galleries).

1979

7th October: Orlando Gabriel born.
Exhibits in Auckland (Barry Lett Galleries, Peter Webb Galleries, New Vision Gallery, Denis Cohn Gallery), New Plymouth (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery), Wellington (Elva Bett Gallery, City Gallery, National Art Gallery).

1980

Exhibits in Auckland (Closet Artists Gallery, Denis Cohn Gallery, Barry Lett Galleries, Peter Webb Galleries, New Vision Gallery), New Plymouth (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery), Palmerston North (Manawatu Art Gallery), Lower Hutt (Dowse Art Gallery), Christchurch (CSA Gallery) and Dunedin (Bosshard Galleries).

1981

Prolonged stay in Mangamahu at the *Flying Motel*, owned by Robin and Mere White. Visited by Nigel Brown.
Exhibits in Auckland (Denis Cohn Gallery, New Vision Gallery), New Plymouth (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery), Palmerston North (Manawatu Art Gallery), Lower Hutt (Dowse Art Gallery), Wellington (Janne Land Gallery), Nelson (Bishop Suter Gallery) and Cagnes-sur-Mer, France (*Festival international de la peinture).*

1982

Return to Auckland.
Death of Rex Haines.
Exhibits in Auckland (Denis Cohn Gallery) and Hamilton (Hamilton Arts Centre).
Negative reviews of *New Paintings 1981-1982* at the Denis Cohn Gallery.

1983

With the assistance of a Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council Grant, travels to the U.S., Europe and Australia.
Death of Rudolf Gopas.
Exhibits in Auckland (Denis Cohn Gallery, First and Last Cafe) and Wellington (Janne Land Gallery).

1984

14th May: Death by suicide.
Anxious Images: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Painting, a touring exhibition from the Auckland City Art Gallery commences shortly after Clairmont's death and includes six of his works.

1987

Major retrospective of Clairmont's work: Philip Clairmont, *curated by Jim and Mary Barr and exhibited by the Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.*

1999

Martin Edmond publishes The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont. *This work and the Barrs' catalogue of 1988 are the only significant publications on Clairmont's career.*

Introduction

In New Zealand's art history, Philip Clairmont (1949-1984) is remembered as an expressionist,[1] a reputation shaped in part by the Romantic image of the rebellious 'outsider artist'. New Zealand critics and art historians characterise his works by their emotionally heightened colour, distorted form and intensely personal self-expression, disregarding the mysticism and spirituality which were essential to German Expressionism. Howie Cook provides a typical example: "His paintings, always sensuous, are usually a turmoil of snaking erotic line and rich colour that give an immediate impression of intense passion, of torment and reckless abandon".[2] This assessment of his style has limitations. Religion inspired and informed many of Clairmont's works. Of the estimated 600 Clairmont paintings and prints known to exist, at least 50 make overt reference to religion and many more are influenced by Clairmont's personal spirituality. Furthermore, it has broader implications stemming from Clairmont's fundamental understanding of art and his role as an artist. Clairmont made reference to a variety of belief systems in his work: Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. Despite his Catholic baptism and Anglican upbringing, Clairmont was no longer a practising Christian by the time he reached adulthood. His consideration of numerous religions suggests an on-going fascination with the ideals of faith and belief rather than an adherence to one particular doctrine. He even aspired to "a commission to execute a large religious work".[3] Consequently, an examination of religion reveals the crucial foundations of Clairmont's work which New Zealand understandings of expressionism do not.

With the exception of Jim and Mary Barr's catalogue for the retrospective *Philip Clairmont, 1987,* and Martin Edmond's new book *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont, 1999,* indepth interpretation of individual works, taking account of

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[1] See: Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting,* 1969, 1975, 1982, 1988, p.214; Elva Bett, *New Zealand Art : A Modern Perspective,* 1986, p. 94; Michael Dunn, Painting Since 1970 in Gil Docking, *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting,* 1971, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1990, p.209; Warwick Brown, *100 New Zealand Paintings,* 1995, 1997, pl.14.
[2] Howie Cook, Phil Clairmont, 1949-1984, *Metro,* September 1984, p.204.
[3] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.150.

this factor, is woefully inadequate.[4] This is a consequence of the limited forum in which Clairmont's work has been discussed (mainly newspaper reviews and journal articles for exhibitions) and the proximity in time of the viewer to the creation of the works.

A religious dimension in Clairmont's work has been noted only briefly by some critics and art historians. The following was written of his first solo exhibition at Several Arts Gallery in Christchurch in March 1970: "There is a religious element in Clairmont's works that tends to be contradictory. *No.58, Study after Grünewald,* for example, does not tie in stylistically with his other works and while it may be considered as a ray of hope in a mad world, it somehow seems incongruous".[5] In 1976, a reviewer for the *New Zealand Herald* interpreted Clairmont's exploration of religion as a recording of its demise: "There are two altarpieces which sum up the disintegration of religion: a disintegration that leaves us with a few shreds of confusion, a few fragments of old and new myths mingling madly with one another over the panels".[6] During the early 1970s, criticism narrowed rapidly and focused primarily on Clairmont's Romantic persona (essential to any self-respecting expressionist) and his style of painting.

Although Clairmont was occasionally referred to as "visionary",[7] religion was not overtly mentioned again until posthumous discussions of his work. In 1990, Dunn wrote: "In his painting too, there are frequent references to Christian symbolism (specifically Catholic), again in a subversive manner rather than orthodox manner".[8] Dunn does not cite specific works to support his argument. Furthermore, he does not expand on the "subversive" elements of Clairmont's

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[4] Both the Barrs and Edmond were friends with Clairmont. Jim Barr was a contemporary of Clairmont's at The University of Canterbury School of Fine Art.

[5] GTM, Philip - Artist, One-Man Exhibition, *The Christchurch Press,* March 1970.

[6] Anonymous, Review of 'Clairmont, Recent Work' at New Vision Galleries, *New Zealand Herald,* 29th June 1976.

[7] Ross Fraser argued Clairmont does "painting of a visionary nature" (see Philip Clairmont: The Anachronism of Visionary Perception, *Art New Zealand, no.1,* August/September 1976, p.18.) Similarly, Stephen Ellis declared "He is one of the few visionaries of contemporary New Zealand painting." (see Myth and Magic, *Elva Bett Gallery Newsletter No.15,* September 1979, no pagination.)

[8] Michael Dunn, Painting Since 1970, in Gil Docking *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting,(5th edn.)* 1990, p.209.

use of religion. Elva Bett, Clairmont's art dealer throughout the 1970s, was one of only a few to discuss his use of religion. She believed that Clairmont and his "expressionist" contemporaries, Tony Fomison (1939-1990), Alistair Nisbet-Smith (1942-), Jeffrey Harris (1949-), Nigel Brown (1949-) and Robin White (1949-), "seek the spiritual uplifting of society through their art".[9] Chapter four examines more closely the religious aspects of Fomison's and Brown's work, both close friends of Clairmont. Michael Morrisey argued, "Clairmont shared with Fomison a Christian iconography and a dark wit".[10] This observation distinguishes Morissey from the majority of commentators who recognised religion in Fomison's work but not Clairmont's.

By neglecting the religious aspects of Clairmont's work, commentators have affected not only interpretations of the artist's imagery, but the scope of his influence as well. Warwick Brown argues that the painter Emare Karaka (1952-), a friend of both Clairmont and Fomison, developed from Clairmont's influence "expressionism and intensity and even distribution of colour" whilst Fomison inspired "a sense of the spiritual".[11] However, in her work, *The Treaties (with related panel),* 1984, **(figure 1)** Karaka applied a triptych format and crucifixion subject matter, both of which recurred in Clairmont's work. The format and the subject matter have religious significance and are foreign to Fomison's oeuvre, yet Clairmont's "spiritual" influence is still overlooked.[12]

Fomison's fascination with religion and spirituality is unquestionable because it is readily visible in his works. By and large, this is also true of Clairmont. He painted crucifixions (*Crucifixion, a triptych,* 1975, **(figure 15)**; *Crucifixion in Wardrobe,* 1976; *Black Crucifixion,* 1981), images of the Virgin Mary, (*Moslem Virgin,* 1973, **(figure 6)**; *Christ unmasked as the Virgin Mary,* 1973; *Our Lady of the Flowers,* 1979, **(figure 31)**), images of Christ (*Mary's Only Begotten Son in the Twentieth Century,* 1972; *Head of Christ,* 1981, **(figure 41)**), even images of Buddha (*Buddha Vietnam,* 1971, **(figure 2)**) yet he is limited (by historians at

[9] Elva Bett, *New Zealand Art: A Modern Perspective,* 1986, p.96.
[10] Michael Morissey, The Magic of Clairmont, *New Zealand Herald,* 20th August 1987.
[11] Warwick Brown, *100 New Zealand Paintings*, 1995, 1997, p.41.
[12] Both Karaka and Clairmont were influenced by Colin McCahon's triptychs and depictions of the Crucifixion.

Figure 1: Emare Karaka, *The Treaties (with related panel)* (1984)
Oil on hessian, 2100mm x 940mm (each panel)
coll: the artist
(Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists...*, p.125)

least) to an expressionist influence rather than a spiritual one. Identifying religious subject matter in Clairmont's work is, then, relatively straight forward: understanding the motivations behind such imagery and evaluating its effects are more complex tasks. A survey of Clairmont's major formative influences is required. There are four key related areas to be considered: religion, art, drugs, and psychology. Each of these facets relates to an underlying notion of spirituality which stimulated Clairmont's work.

Clairmont had access to a wide variety of visual and literary material. As a child, he had frequent exposure to art books and feature films[13] which developed a fascination he maintained as an adult. Nigel Brown recalls seeing Clairmont's book collection in the early 1980s: "One got the feeling that these books had been well and truly used and were a necessary part of the artist's mantle".[14] An active imagination and a passion for paintings fuelled Clairmont's exploration of art history. He had a prodigious knowledge of both art works and artists' biographies.[15] As a teenager, he admired artists such as Matthias Grünewald (c1475-1528), Diego Velásquez (1599-1660), Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), Francisco Goya (1746-1828), Max Beckmann (1884-1950), but, as will be seen in chapter five, Francis Bacon (1909-1992) above all. Clairmont's thorough knowledge of art history, spanning five centuries, enriched his paintings and prints.

At the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, under the tutelage of Rudolf Gopas (1913-1983), Clairmont's canvases exploded with colour, reflecting the influence of the artists favoured by Gopas: German Expressionists and their precursors, Edvard Munch (1863-1944), Vincent Van Gogh (1854-1890) and Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Gopas had a lasting impact on the development of Clairmont's style, discussed in chapter two. Clairmont's experience of colour was heightened during his first year at art school when he discovered psychedelic drugs. Drugs (whether hallucinogenics, barbiturates, or amphetamines) remained an integral part of his life, having a profound effect on

[13] Thelma Clairmont, interview with author, 17th September 1999.
[14] Nigel Brown, personal correspondence to author, 7th July 1999.
[15] Viki Clairmont, personal correspondence to author, 3rd November 1999.

his painting. Drug theory was also extremely influential; it broadened the scope of Clairmont's use from naïve experimentation to philosophical exploration.

Clairmont's drug use should be viewed within its proper context. Clairmont was very much involved in the hippy culture of the late 1960s. Hippies celebrated hallucinogenics as a means of opening the "doors of perception" (a term borrowed from the Romantic English poet, William Blake, by Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) for the title of his book on LSD: *The Doors of Perception,* 1968. This book consequently inspired the naming of the 1960s music group The Doors). New Zealand critics have consistently underplayed the role of drugs in Clairmont's art. Neil Roberts believes Clairmont had to "rely on artificially induced stimuli"[16] to create his imagery, a common response which does not take into account Clairmont's interpretation of the function of drugs.

Clairmont does not openly discuss drugs in his Honours thesis, *An Exercise in Perception,* 1970.[17] However, its presence is noticeable in light of later comments by the artist where he recalls working on his Honours submission: "There was... a lot of opium around at the time and I spent a lot of time in one room, smashed".[18] He wrote: "These drawings are partly conscious and partly unconscious in pointing towards a specific direction. Drawing that attempts to deprive the "ego" of part of one's "own" i.e. personality, in order to reveal something more significant... the innate personality of the objects... objects that are the influencing factors on our own personalities".[19] Ego-loss, also known as depersonalisation, is a recognised side-effect of drugs, particularly hallucinogenics.[20] References to the unconscious and ego are the direct influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, which also shaped Clairmont's work. Clairmont frequently cited the unconscious as the source of his creativity. He believed drugs were a vehicle which enabled freer access to that part of his psyche.

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[16] Neil Roberts, *Heaven and Blood: Paintings and Drawings by Alan Pearson, 1959-1999*, 1999, p.10.
[17] The opening essay in *An Exercise in Perception* is included as an appendix.
[18] Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters vol.1 A-M,* 1980, p.40.
[19] Philip Clairmont, *An Exercise in Perception,* 1970, no pagination. The quotation is not edited but is a direct transcription of the original.
[20] W. David Watts, Jnr, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Sociological Study*, 1971, p.73.

Art, drugs and psychology each have a spiritual component parallelled in organised religion. In fact, it is not possible to examine the religious aspects of Clairmont's work without taking these other three areas into consideration. First, however, a clarification of terminology is required. Many authors provide personal interpretations of the terms 'spirituality', 'religion' and 'mysticism'. This results in confusion as to where one idea ends and another begins. For example, WT Stace argues that, "the universal characteristic of mysticism is the experience or vision of unity",[21] a description similar to that of John Bluck who states, "All Classical definitions of spirituality contain [the] theme of integration and wholeness".[22] Ross Hampton defines religion vaguely, which makes it also an apt definition of mysticism: "Religion is typically characterised as a collection of beliefs and values about things which man feels to be important, related in a systematic way".[23]

Although spirituality, mysticism, and religion are closely related, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary,* 1990, provides distinct definitions of each and is the point of reference for this thesis. Therefore, spirituality is "concerned with the soul or spirit etc., not with external reality".[24] The spirit exists in opposition to physical matter. Religion is "the belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship,... the expression of this in worship, ... [and] a particular system of faith and worship...".[25] Mysticism, the most problematic term to define, suggests "hidden meaning" and is associated with the occult.[26] A mystic "seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain unity or identity with or absorption into the Deity or the ultimate reality, or who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond understanding".[27]

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[21] Quoted in W. David Watts Jnr, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Sociological Study,* 1971, p.31.
[22] John Bluck, *Long, White and Cloudy: In Search of a Kiwi Spirituality,* 1998, p.12.
[23] Ross Hampton, A Sociological View of the Role of Religion in Society: The Potential of Theology to Alienate or Liberate, in John Hincliff (ed.), *Perspectives on Religion, New Zealand Viewpoints*, 1974, p.38.
[24] R.E. Allen (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 8th edition,* 1990, p.1174.
[25] Ibid, p.1015.
[26] Ibid, p.784.
[27] Ibid, p.784.

Superficially, Christianity, German Expressionism, 1960s drug culture, and Freudian psycho-analysis seem unrelated and the differences extreme. However, the unifying variable underlying these four fields of interest is the essense of Clairmont's painting. Each category is not clearly distinguished from the others so difficulties arise when teasing out the separate implications in various works. Often, it is the relationships between them (such as drugs and art, or religion and art, for example) which are the most intriguing and of particular significance to Clairmont. To address such problems here, each chapter focuses on a Clairmont work (ordered chronologically) which is discussed through a particular theme. The key works demonstrate the range of Clairmont's religious imagery and generate detailed analysis. Each theme acts as a filter, uniting aspects of the discussion relevant to that specific theme and allowing the remainder to pass through to other pertinent filters.

Thus, *Buddha Vietnam,* 1971, **(figure 2)** examines the contemporary social context in which Clairmont was working. Hippy culture and drug culture are of particular relevance because Clairmont was involved with each and they had a strong spiritual component. *Moslem Virgin (Many Bleeding Hearts),* 1973, **(figure 6)** focuses on Clairmont's historical concerns, mainly the changing relationship between religion and art following the advent of psychology in the late nineteenth century. The impact of German Expressionism and the role of symbolism in Clairmont's work are also examined. *Butterfly Mirror with Violet Flowers*, 1974, **(figure 11)** surveys the theme of 'alternative realities' in relation to Clairmont's major interests (drugs, art, religion, psychology). Gaining access to other realms was a key aspect of Clairmont's approach to his work and is manifest in a variety of forms via the interests listed above. *Lightsource,* 1978, **(figure 13)** places Clairmont within the context of New Zealand art history. Religion is discussed relative to Colin McCahon, Tony Fomison, and Nigel Brown, three New Zealand artists recognised for their examination of Christian subject matter. *Our Lady of the Flowers,* 1979, **(figure 31)** marks a stylistic change in Clairmont's work and a geographical change for the artist (from Wellington to Auckland). The influence of alcohol instead of psychedelic drugs and Clairmont's changing appreciation of religion are examined in relation to

this work. A later work, *The Holy Family,* 1980, is also discussed in this chapter, raising questions concerning the impact of Francis Bacon on Clairmont's oeuvre. *Self-Portrait at 33,* 1983, **(figure 37)** explores the themes of madness and the mind. The association with religion is secondary to the crucial topics of psychology and art (The identity of Van Gogh and Romanticism in particular). This work demonstrates the last phase in Clairmont's career and reinforces ideas discussed in previous chapters.

Figure 2: Philip Clairmont, *Buddha Vietnam* (1971)
Acrylic on hessian, 1236mm x 906mm
coll: Aymard Bradley, Wellington.
(University of Canterbury Fine Arts Slide Collection)

Chapter One: Buddha Vietnam (1971)

In 1971, Philip Clairmont painted a series of works in response to the atrocities of the Vietnam War. The *Vietnam Paintings*, as they are known, include *Self-Portrait (Indo-China), Vietnam Paranoia,* and *Buddha Vietnam* (**figure 2**). These works are not only a commentary on war; they are also a personal reaction to contemporary political, economic and spiritual concerns. Clairmont was heavily involved with both the hippy culture and drug culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, an association which had a significant impact on his early career. The hippy embrace of Eastern religions and the dependence of drug theories on religious conventions are particularly relevant to Clairmont's own developing spirituality and are evident in *Buddha Vietnam.*

According to Clairmont, *Buddha Vietnam* shows "War and Western corruption - contaminating centuries of religious belief".[28] The primary concerns were war and religion but Clairmont was also responding to Americanism, materialism, technological expansion, government policy, and the inadequacy of Christianity. However, unlike Clairmont's later works, such as *Our Lady of the Flowers,* 1979, (see **figure 31**) which rely heavily on symbolism to convey meaning, an interpretation of *Buddha Vietnam* presents difficulties. Hallucinogenic drugs informed the imagery. Common features of psychedelic art visible in *Buddha Vietnam* are the "breaking up of perceptual constancies, high capacity for visual imagery and fantasy, [and] symbolising and myth-making tendencies".[29] Clairmont used drugs to explore worlds outside everyday experience, hoping to reveal alternative realities in his painting. The bizarre forms and elusive meaning alienate the viewer who does not share Clairmont's altered state of mind. The work is clearly an image of Buddha and there is a sensation of bliss and transcendence (achieved through the luminous use of colour, soft edges and rounded forms), but deeper significance remains buried. Despite Clairmont's outrage, *Buddha Vietnam* does not analyse the Vietnam War in any detail nor present an argument by raising a number of issues. Instead, the

[28] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Philip Clairmont,* 1987, p.17.
[29] Robert Masters and Jean Houston, *Psychedelic Art,* 1968, p.88.

image has immediate impact, arresting the viewer by making a singular, bold anti-war statement.

The face in *Buddha Vietnam,* surrounded by a halo of light, appears calm and contemplative. In stark contrast are the individual features, consisting of faces, eyes and slashing lines of colour. The Buddha appears to corrode: the violent actions of the West (represented in the busy detail of the work) implement the decay of an ancient, placid culture and belief system (symbolised by the Buddha). The West's impact is reminiscent of acid rain, possibly reflecting the environmentalist and anti-nuclear concerns of the time.

Buddha Vietnam binds together many key features of hippy philosophy. Clairmont considered himself "part of the whole 1960s hippy culture".[30] Hippy culture was characterised by rebellion against Western institutions and establishments, challenging of social boundaries, anti-materialism, pacifism, and exploration of alternative ways of life. Social institutions such as the government, the police and the church came under the greatest attack for propagating the status quo. The police in particular often clashed with student protesters, resulting in damning commentary in youth-oriented underground magazines. For example, in 1973, *Ferret* (an underground comic to which Clairmont contributed) stated: "the police aren't there to serve the people, they are here to maintain the bourgeoisie who control the state".[31] A work such as *Buddha Vietnam* reflects these concerns. The events in Vietnam and the subsequent response in New Zealand are key antecedents to the painting, providing an insight into Clairmont's motivations for the work.

In 1954, Vietnam came under the rule of two opposing regimes: North Vietnam became Communist, supported by both the U.S.S.R and China, and led by Ho Chi Minh; South Vietnam, no longer a French colony, retained ties with the West and was led by a Roman Catholic, Ngo Dinh Diem. The predominantly Buddhist peasant population in both North and South Vietnam suffered at the hands of Communist and Roman Catholic supporters, leading to protests in

[30] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters,* 1980, p.40.

1963 when a Buddhist monk burnt himself to death.[32] The same year, Diem was executed in a coup.

For the remainder of the 1960s and early 1970s, war raged between communist and capitalist supporters in South Vietnam. The Viet Cong, a South Vietnamese army, had the political support of North Vietnam, who sent supplies to the South via Cambodia and Laos. Lyndon Johnston, the U.S. president, authorised bombing of North Vietnam in 1963 as a show of support to South Vietnamese allies; a political move motivated primarily by the contemporary U.S. crusade against the 'red scourge' of communism.[33] American involvement in Vietnam was severely criticised internationally, resulting in violent protests - often between students and the police. After 10 long years of seemingly senseless conflict, U.S. troops withdrew from South Vietnam in 1973. The consequent communist victory ensured the continued persecution of Buddhists. Although international attention moved away from Vietnam following the U.S. withdrawal, conflict continued in the region: Vietnam, with the support of the U.S.S.R., invaded Cambodia, which was allied with China.[34]

The Vietnam War brought unprecedented international attention to South-East Asia. For the younger generation, the East provided an alternative to the inadequacies of Western culture and religions. The Vietnam War created a rallying point for hippy culture in New Zealand, providing a clear enemy (namely, the U.S. and governments which supported it, such as that in New Zealand) and many persecuted victims (Vietnamese Buddhist peasants). The *Vietnam Paintings* were Clairmont's personal protest, reflecting his strong social conscience and likely involvement in anti-Vietnam War demonstrations. He also protested, both by marching and painting, against the Springbok Tour of 1981 (see *Mangamahu No Tour 1981,* 1981 **(figure 3)**) and nuclear testing (*Hiroshima Mon Amour,* 1979 **(figure 4)**). According to Edmond, "[Clairmont]

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[31] Anonymous, *Ferret*, December 1973, issue 4.
[32] Ian Beckett, *Conflict in the Twentieth Century: South East Asia from 1945,* 1986, p.30.
[33] Ibid, p.30.
[34] Ibid, p.36.

Figure 3: Philip Clairmont, *Mangamahu 1981, No Tour* (1981)
Ink and pastel on paper, 800mm x 606mm
coll: Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui
(Barr, *Philip Clairmont,* p.47)

Figure 4: Philip Clairmont, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1979)
Linocut, 337mm x 203mm (edition of 30)
(Ocean in Motion poster)

was a member of the group Artists Against Apartheid, of HART (Halt All Racist Tours), of the Labour Party and of the radical Patu squad".[35]

Throughout the 1960s, the National Party governed New Zealand. Clairmont supported the left wing, a stance consistent with hippy ideals which were in direct opposition to Government policy. He stated: "I'm basically socialist inclined but I'm not aligned to a political party".[36] The Government, under the leadership of Sir Keith Holyoake, promoted "private enterprise and healthy competition";[37] provided military support to the U.S. troops fighting in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos; endorsed touring Springbok rugby teams;[38] wanted to "restore voluntary unionism"[39] and lower taxes; and took a strong stance against "state socialism and communism".[40] All these issues reinforced the youth culture's conviction that social and political institutions had to be overturned. Tony Geddes recalls paranoia amongst young people that 'the establishment' (a faceless conglomeration of the police, government, and armed forces) was conspiring to send young men to fight in Vietnam.[41] An anonymous writer for *Ferret*, probably fuelled by drug-induced delusions, concluded "... thus the New Zealand military - police - SIS - U.S. military - CIA link is complete".[42] Edmond identified traces of this paranoia in Clairmont's work: "The prevalence of swastikas in works from the mid-1970s suggests that Clairmont feared his own culture was at the very least censorious, if not essentially fascist...".[43]

The youth culture believed that the church and, by extension, Christianity as a whole were part of this institutional network: "Christianity, the religion of Western imperialism, is seen as an oppressive force, the inseparable ally of

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[35] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.167.
[36] Philip Clairmont, interview with Hamish Keith, 9th March 1981.
[37] Paul Harris and Stephen Levine (eds.), *The New Zealand Politics Source Book*, 1992, p.140.
[38] Protests came to a head much later in 1981 because many New Zealanders were outraged that South African rugby teams may tour when the South African Government supported apartheid. This issue dated back to the 1970s. It was mentioned in New Zealand political party manifestos in both 1972 and 1975. See Paul Harris and Stephen Levine, (eds.), *The New Zealand Politics Source Book*, 1992, pp.150 & 155.
[39] Ibid, p.141
[40] Ibid, p.141.
[41] Tony Geddes, interview with author, 17th June 1999.
[42] Anonymous, *Ferret, no.4,* December 1973, no pagination.
[43] Martin Edmond, *The Ressurection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, pp.151-152.

aggression".[44] The church lost favour due to three key factors: "its support for, and condoning of, war and violence, its general acceptance of the status quo and of established values, and its apparent lack of deep spirituality".[45]

Historically, New Zealand society had a relaxed attitude towards religion. In 1975, John Bluck claimed: "Although 17% of the population are practising adherents of any denominational religion, most New Zealanders still like to refer to themselves as Christian".[46] In 1991, a survey carried out by Massey University found similar results: 70% of the population "believe somehow in a God" whereas less than 15% were committed to any religious institution.[47] Bluck suggested New Zealanders predominantly practise civil religion: "A system of faith and worship that has a primary though not exclusive allegiance to an idea of society or morality rather than an idea of God".[48] Discussions on religion during the 1970s concluded New Zealand was a secular nation. James Veitch declared: "Religion has been a factor of low-key social significance at infrequent intervals".[49]

A remarkable exception to the general rule of secularity in New Zealand is the Heresy Trial of Presbyterian Minister and theology lecturer, Professor Lloyd Geering. In November 1967, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, held in Christchurch, heard charges laid against Geering due to a sermon he delivered in Wellington the previous March. The controversy arose over Geering's claims that "man has no immortal soul - at least in the traditional view that, at death, the human soul automatically survives the death of the body and lives in a spiritual dwelling elsewhere".[50] Geering was found innocent of the charges, although not before news of the trial had made headlines across the country: "By the time the assembly met, the publicity had

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[44] Kenneth Leech, *Youthquake, The Growth of a Counter-Culture Through Two Decades,* 1973, p.185.
[45] Ibid, p.184.
[46] John Bluck, Religion: Civilised and Moralised, in John Hinchcliff (ed.), *Perspectives on Religion,* 1974, p.16.
[47] John Bluck, *Long, White and Cloudy: In Search of a Kiwi Spirituality,* 1998, p.11.
[48] John Bluck, Religion: Civilised and Moralised, in John Hinchcliff (ed.), *Perspectives on Religion,* 1974, p.15.
[49] James Veitch, Heresy and Freedom, in Christopher Nichol and James Veitch (eds.), *Religion in New Zealand,* 1980, p.140.

reached such a crescendo that no-one in New Zealand could have been unaware that a Heresy Trial was about to take place. Discussions on Resurrection and Immortality became popular in the hotel bars of the land".[51] Clairmont, who was in his first year of Art School at the time, must have been intrigued by the Heresy Trial. The medieval, antiquated tone of such an event, played out within the seemingly secular context of New Zealand society had a strange and surreal quality. As will be seen in chapter two, Clairmont enjoyed the clash between religion and its decreasing relevance in the twentieth century, first brought to life for the artist perhaps by Geering's trial.

By the standards of contemporary theology, Geering's proposition was far from radical. The Death of God movement, which arose in the U.S. in 1965 and spread across the Western world,[52] was named after Gabriel Vahanian's book *The Death of God,* 1961. The fundamental concerns of the movement originated in the early nineteenth century[53] and are visible in the existentialist theories of the early twentieth century (discussed in chapter five). Vahanian wrote: "Our culture is no longer transcendentalist but immanentist; no longer sacred or sacramental, but secular or profane. This transition is explained by the fact that the essentially mythological world view of Christianity has been suceeded by a thoroughgoing scientific view of reality, in terms of which either God is no longer necessary, or he is neither necessary or unnecessary: he is irrelevant - he is dead".[54] If Vahanian's claims were true, Geering's Heresy Trial would not have eventuated. However, Vahanian's argument and the Geering Trial are both extreme examples of the struggle that existed between an outmoded belief system and an empirical, modern society. Clairmont was of the generation which witnessed this struggle. Although the youth culture dismissed Western religion, siding with Vahanian's point of view, Clairmont appears as an observer, siding with neither Vahanian nor those who accused Geering of heresy. Instead, Clairmont documented the friction between the two polarities. Consequently, *Buddha Vietnam*, in addition to depicting Western

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[50] Quoting Lloyd Geering in Everald Compton, *The Trial of Lloyd Geering,* 1970, p.5.
[51] Ibid, p.6.
[52] Jackson Lee Ice and John J Carey (eds.), *The Death of God Debate*, 1967, p.11.
[53] Ibid, p.18.
[54] Quoted in Ibid, p.25.

warfare versus Eastern religion, is also an imaginative portrayal of the conflict between contemporary empiricism and ancient spirituality.

Unable to find satisfying spiritual guidance within Christianity, estranged youths looked to alternatives. The population of New Zealand's four major denominations (Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist) declined during the 1960s and 1970s whilst the number of Buddhists, Hindus and Moslems increased.[55] In part, this was due to immigration but it also reflects a growing Eastern religious presence in New Zealand society. Two of Clairmont's contemporaries at Ilam, Tony Geddes and Ross Marwick, recall that for many people, an exploration of Eastern cultures extended no further than "Hindu clothes and Nehru shirts".[56] Some practised meditation and still others travelled to India, seeking their guru.[57] Although there are various forms of Buddhism present in Vietnam (Hinayana and Mahayana for example), "Zen comes closest to expressing the Vietnamese character, and as such, their attitude in all walks of life can best be described as a 'Zen outlook'".[58] Zen Buddhism originated in India but was introduced to Vietnam from China.[59] An important aspect of Zen is "transmission of teaching from mind to mind",[60] a psychic connection rather than verbal instruction.

Clairmont explored Eastern religions and owned books on Buddhism and Hinduism,[61] apparent in *Buddha Vietnam.* A later work, *Portrait of Doris Lusk,* 1973, (**figure 5)** demonstrates Clairmont's continuing interest in Buddhism. Lusk taught Clairmont at Ilam during his first year in 1967 and reciprocated with a portrait of her ex-student: *Six Studies of Philip Clairmont,* 1973. The three-quarter perspective of Clairmont's composition distances Lusk from the viewer. She appears detached and contemplative, refusing to interact with her audience. A photograph of an Asian child has been collaged into the lower left

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[55] *New Zealand Census of Population and Dwellings 1981, vol.3,* p.8.
[56] Ross Marwick, interview with author, 2nd September 1999.
[57] Tony Geddes, interview with author, 17th June 1999.
[58] Thich Thien-An, *Buddhism and Zen in Vietnam in Relation to the Development of Buddhism in Asia,* 1975, p.27.
[59] Ibid, p.24.
[60] Ibid, p.24.
[61] Thelma Clairmont, interview with author, 17th September 1999.

Figure 5: Philip Clairmont, *Portrait of Doris Lusk* (1973)
Oil on gesso on board, 806mm x 582mm
private collection, Hamilton
(Barr, *Philip Clairmont*, p.32)

corner of the image. Jim and Mary Barr suggest the child is a reference to the "self-immolation of Buddhist monks".[62] Indeed, he appears to worship not Buddha, but Lusk; drawing a parallel between the role of the artist and the role of a prophet or spiritual guide. The Barrs also comment on the inclusion of Clairmont's face as a "third eye" in the centre of Lusk's forehead.[63] It is Clairmont, rather than Lusk, who makes eye contact with viewers and invites them into the image. The third eye is known as an urna and appears frequently on statues of Buddha. Clairmont invested Lusk with the gravity and adoration usually reserved for religious icons.

Another key feature of hippy culture underpinning this enthusiasm for Eastern religions was a strong anti-materialist stance. The importance of money to Western society, and U.S. society in particular, was considered a fundamental aspect of society's moral and spiritual decline. Keith Sinclair has argued that materialism superceded religion in New Zealand during the hippy era: "The pursuit of health and possessions fills more minds than thoughts of salvation ... The New Zealanders surpass all Europeans and rival the Americans in their love of motorcars and washing machines. Acquisitiveness, like puritanism, provides a strong incentive to work".[64] A Latin cross appears on the right cheek of the Buddha in *Buddha Vietnam.* It is possibly a subtle reference to the Catholic church and materialistic Western values. It appears as a scar or a tattoo, permanently marking Eastern belief systems. Alexa Johnston asserts that "Clairmont's use of religious imagery in his work is often cynical and detached. He has made collages, using devotional pictures of Mary and Christ, which condemn what he sees as the church's capitulation to the standards and values of a materialistic world".[65]

The U.S. ties with materialism, coupled with its dominant involvement in the Vietnam War, led to a strong anti-American feeling in the New Zealand youth culture. It was conveniently overlooked that the music, fashions and ideas

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[62] Jim and Mary Barr, *Philip Clairmont,* 1987, p.33.
[63] ibid, p.33.
[64] Quoted by Michael Hill, Religion and Society: Cement or Ferment? in Christopher Nichol and James Veitch (eds.), *Religion in New Zealand,* 1980, p.218.
[65] Alexa Johnston, *Anxious Images, Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art*, 1984, p.12.

coming out of San Francisco and Los Angeles shaped New Zealand's hippy culture. As Richard Dingwall explains, music "signified a lifestyle" during the 1960s and 1970s.[66] It contributed a certain atmosphere to Clairmont's studio when he painted. In some ways, music provided comfort; Clairmont felt that "painting is a lonely activity ... and you've got your music to keep you company".[67] According to Terry Snow, Clairmont saw himself as a "frustrated lead guitarist".[68] Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, Cream, Black Sabbath, and Jimi Hendrix were played frequently and loudly (Both Jim Barr[69] and Tony Geddes[70] recall loud music being played at Clairmont's flat during their university years). Clairmont admired Hendrix in particular for his "painterly qualities."[71] This music was at its best when the listener was stoned.

An important aspect of *Buddha Vietnam* is indeed the impact of the drug culture. The drug, hippy, and youth cultures of the 1960s overlap, but are not synonymous. Clairmont, however, was affiliated with all three groups. Although cannabis and the hallucinogenic drugs LSD, mescaline, and psylocibin are associated with hippy culture, Clairmont was part of the drug culture which consumed a wider variety of drugs, including 'harder' drugs such as heroin, crack, opium, and speed. Drugs were viewed with increasing pessimism as the 1970s progressed, having an adverse effect on the interpretation of Clairmont's work. To understand his art, as well as his spirituality, it is important to understand the physiological effects of psychedelic drugs and the context in which they were consumed.

Frequently, drug users discussed their habit as a quasi-religious activity. Edmond explains their drug consumption: "The drug culture of the early 1970s was communal, democratic, egalitarian and idealistic. The substances we used became sacraments around which we gathered to explore our possibilities".[72] He continues, "The process of making art was analogous to the shamanist

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[66] Richard Dingwall, Outside From the Inside, *The New Zealand Listener,* 7th May 1988.
[67] Bruce Morrison, *Profiles: Series of Films on New Zealand Artists*, 1981.
[68] Terry Snow, Painter with a Rock and Roll Approach, *The New Zealand Herald,* June 1980.
[69] Jim Barr, interview with author, 28th July 1999.
[70] Tony Geddes, interview with author, 17th June 1999.
[71] Bruce Morrison, *Profiles: Series of Films on New Zealand Artists*, 1981.
[72] Martin Edmond, *Chemical Evolution, Drugs and Art Production 1970-1980,* 1997, p.12.

vision: you made yourself ready, entered a charged state, saw visions, then came back and reported upon what you had seen. You could take it further and learn how to paint in a possessed state, as Clairmont did on speed".[73] Edmond does not use a Christian analogy; the word "shaman" suggests something far more exotic, ancient and 'primitive'. The product of this "shamanist vision" (ie. the painting) supposedly portrays transcendental experiences as opposed to external reality. Consequently, a work such as *Buddha Vietnam*, created under the influence of hallucinogenics, shows a world of luminous colour and form which can only exist either in the mind or on canvas.

The fragmentary, hazy appearance of *Buddha Vietnam* activates the viewer's imagination as he/she attempts to make sense of the image. The work evokes two psychological processes: free association and the principle of Gestalt. Through free association, the viewer tries to alleviate the ambiguity of the shapes and forms by imposing meaning and relevance (psychoanalysts use Rorschach inkblots in this way to access the unconscious). Clairmont knew that his works had this quality; in an interview with Hamish Keith he said, "...the eye, yes. It's the painter's eye,... sometimes just suggested, sometimes it's not at all present, sometimes people see it when it's not there, not even intended to be there but it appears".[74] The principle of Gestalt is that the whole is great than the sum of its parts. However, one cannot perceive the whole and the parts simultaneously so, in the case of *Buddha Vietnam,* the viewer's eye oscillates between contemplating the serenity of the Buddha and surveying the tiny detail from which he is constructed. *Buddha Vietnam* requires the mental participation of the viewer. Considering the spiritual nature of drug consumption, the free association and Gestalt effects evoked by *Buddha Vietnam* may have been attributed by Clairmont and his friends to the artist's successful exploration of either his unconscious or some other realm of existence.

When Clairmont painted *Buddha Vietnam*, he was heavily involved in the drug culture. Clairmont owned books by both Aldous Huxley (*The Doors of*

[73] Ibid, p.28.

Perception and Heaven and Hell, 1968*)* and Timothy Leary (1920-1998) (*The Psychedelic Experience,* 1964*)*, exposing him to many of these ideas.[75] Both these authors were ardent supporters of drug use as a spiritual pursuit. Clairmont's choice of subject matter and manner of depiction reflect this influence. Leary originated the approach to LSD consumption as part of a broader ritual or ceremony: "Since psychedelic drugs expose us to different levels of perception and experience, use of them is ultimately a philosophic enterprise, compelling us to confront the nature of reality and the nature of our fragile, subjective belief systems".[76] When Leary was arrested for possession of cannabis, he claimed that they were part of his religion, a defence rejected by the jury. Leary also looked to the East, translating the Tibetan Book of the Dead from "Anglo-Buddhist to American psychedelic".[77] As already stated, Clairmont owned this publication: *The Psychedelic Experience,* in which Leary draws parallels between the Buddhist after-life and an LSD trip: both involve "rebirth" and encompass heaven and hell.

A common justification for drug use is the belief that "drugs are the origin of religion and philosophy".[78] Aldous Huxley insisted almost every religion has drug taking at its core. He described his experience of mescaline in a manner particularly relevant to a work such as *Buddha Vietnam*:

First, and most important, is the experience of light. Everything is brightly illuminated, shining from within, and a riot of colours is intensified to a pitch unknown in the normal state ... such preternatural light is characteristic of all visionary experience. Along with light, there comes recognition of heightened significance. The self-luminous objects possess a meaning as intense as their colour. Here, significance is identical with being: objects do not stand for anything but themselves. Their meaning is precisely this: that they are intensely themselves, and, being so, are manifestations of the essential giveness and otherness of the universe.[79]

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[74] Philip Clairmont, interview with Hamish Keith, 1981, p.4.
[75] Viki Clairmont, personal communication to author, 2nd November 1999.
[76] Timothy Leary, *Flashbacks, a Personal and Cultural History of an Era,* 1983, 1990, p.32.
[77] Ibid, p.140.
[78] Ibid, p.91.
[79] Aldous Huxley, The Far Continents of the Mind, (1954) in Michael Horowitz and Cynthia Palmer (eds.), *Moksha, Writings on Psychedelics and the Visionary Experience, 1931-1963,* 1980, p.59.

Huxley, Leary and Allen Ginsberg (1926-1999), were three key figures in the promotion of drugs as a key to spiritual worlds. Ginsberg visited the University of Canterbury twice whilst Clairmont was a student, in order to give recitations of his poetry. He too relied on religious constructs: "for thousands of years, pre-industrial societies taught that personal growth involved visionary experiences. A guru, a shaman, had always been necessary to pilot one through the confusing realms within. In all Eastern yogic texts it was strongly emphasised that the release of internal (ie. neurological) energies could result in confusion unless a master was on hand".[80] He adapted this concept of shamanism to describe the support required during hallucinogenic experiences.[81] It was Eastern religions, not Western, which inspired frequent analogies in drug theory, highlighting the division between the church and the younger generation.

These writers became "gurus" within hippy culture. Although hippies opposed Christianity, they accepted aspects of Western religion when discussed in relation to drugs. In part, this was due to an important distinction between Christianity and the church. The former remained a vague but persistent presence in contemporary society. The Christian rudiments of transcendence, ritual, enlightenment and hyper-reality contributed a robust framework to drug theory. Conversely, the youth culture considered the church part of a corrupt and out-dated establishment, irrelevant to their daily lives. Although there are obvious traces of Christianity in drug theory, its negative association with the church often sublimated overt references to Christian origins. Instead, Eastern religions were frequently cited (as demonstrated by Leary and Ginsberg).

In addition to the immediate concerns of Vietnam and Christianity, Clairmont may have painted Buddha as a response to opium. He often took opium during this period,[82] and owned Alethea Hayter's *Opium and the Romantic*

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[80] Paraphrased by Timothy Leary, *Flashbacks,* 1983, 1990, p.47.
[81] Ibid, p.47.
[82] Philip Clairmont quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters*, 1980, p.40.

Imagination, 1968.[83] A passage from *Opium* is particularly relevant to *Buddha Vietnam.* The poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge described his opium experience thus: "I should much wish, like the Indian Visha, to float about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the lotos, and wake once in a million years for a few minutes - just to know that I was going to sleep a million years more".[84] An unnamed addict also included in Hayter's book felt a "Buddha-like calm" on opium.[85] Clairmont must also have experienced this sense of calm, adding to the resonance of the Buddha image in this work. Watching eyes, again a repeated motif in Clairmont's work, are also a phenomenon of opium use.[86]

Kenneth Leech suggests that the use of drugs as a quasi-religion in the 1960s was preceded in the 1950s by a need to fill the growing spiritual void in society. He writes, "At heart the Beats were a religious movement, a quest for spirituality outside the institutional American religious framework ... there was thus a spiritual search among some sections of the alienated young prior to the development of the drug culture. But the spread of drug use was a central phenomenon in the growth of this search, and remains important for understanding its direction and progress".[87] Although Ginsberg came to prominence during the 1950s and is remembered for his involvement with the Beat generation, his poetry and drug theories were of continuing significance to the subsequent hippy generation of the 1960s. Leech explains that even when the risks of drug taking were understood, the desire for "an experience of transcendence" outweighed any fear of the consequences.[88]

The East appealed to the drug and hippy cultures because of its spiritual richness and the Western perception that drug use was an important part of that process. Leech contends that "it was thought that drugs and the spiritual path could go well together, and Eastern traditions had more to offer, it seemed, than Christianity".[89] He also claims: "in India cannabis had been used

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[83] Viki Clairmont, personal communication to author, 2nd November 1999.
[84] Quoted in Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*, 1968, p.213.
[85] Ibid, p.213.
[86] Ibid, p.292.
[87] Kenneth Leech, *Youthquake,* 1973, p.32.
[88] Ibid, p.50.
[89] Ibid, p.64.

for centuries as an aid to concentration and prayer".[90] A Western understanding of the East was quickly incorporated into popular culture. Allen Atwell, a psychedelic artist, "says that he paints in the tradition of the Tibetan Masters: mentally projecting visual images upon space before him and then painting what was seen".[91] Despite the discretion in the practices of Tibetan Masters and 'Heads' (committed drug users), the outcome was seen to be the same, a 'breaking through' into other realities.

Although the links between drug use in the West and its origins in the East were generally accepted, this was an inaccurate perception. Western counter-culture combined Eastern religions with a variety of other beliefs: "occultism, theosophy, psychic and spiritualistic movements, astrology and so on".[92] This hybrid mysticism arose from a superficial understanding of Eastern religions and drug-induced visions. Eastern spiritual teachers did not always place an emphasis on mind-expansion as a path to enlightenment[93] and even warned "against the search for ecstasy".[94]

Thus when Clairmont portrayed Buddha in a painting about war, the connotations went far beyond religion. Overtly religious imagery dominates the finished product, enabling Clairmont to comment on contemporary political, social and spiritual issues, as well as incorporating drug theories. The role of certain individuals to enlighten others was no longer recognised by the younger generation in priests and vicars, but in gurus and artists. Leary stated in 1969, "There are three groups who are bringing about the great evolution of the new age that we are going through now. They are the dope dealers, the rock musicians and the underground artists and writers".[95] Religion (be it Buddhist, Catholic, Jewish) provided a familiar and accessible language with which Clairmont could communicate a number of ideas to the viewer. Although the revolution of the 1960s hippy and drug cultures appears the antithesis of organised Western religion, both were indebted to religious language and

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[90] Ibid, p.46.
[91] Robert Masters and Jean Houston, *Psychedelic Art,* 1968, p.122.
[92] Kenneth Leech, *Youthquake,* 1973, p.90.
[93] Ibid, p.65.
[94] Ibid, 66.

convention (eg: ritualistic, taking "sacraments", use of guide or shaman, transcendence). Possibly for this reason, Clairmont combined his sympathy for mainstream religion (Catholicism in particular) with counterculture spirituality (prevalent in drug theory).

[95] Quoted in ibid, p.53.

Figure 6: Philip Clairmont, *Moslem Virgin (Many Bleeding Hearts)* (1973)
Mixed media on photomechanical reproduction, 416mm x 319mm
coll: Rachel Power, Auckland
(University of Canterbury Fine Arts Slide Collection)

Chapter Two: Moslem Virgin (Many Bleeding Hearts) 1973

Clairmont sympathised with the hippy rejection of religion but religious imagery also provided a rich visual history and was a positive influence in his work. Catholicism dominates the imagery and symbolism in *Moslem Virgin (Many Bleeding Hearts),* 1973, **(figure 6)** which is a significant shift from *Buddha Vietnam.* The earlier work was Clairmont's public protest against war and the destruction of Eastern religions; although *Moslem Virgin* was "a comment on the 1973 war in the Middle East",[96] its focus was the artist's relationship with Catholicism. Clairmont interacted with the sacrosanct depiction of the Virgin by collaging an ecclectic collection of images over her form, and then painting over the collage with vivid, expressive strokes of colour, transforming the original image into one of personal significance. *Moslem Virgin* is an hypnotic work which addresses primarily historical concerns, revealing the profound effect of early twentieth-century art, religion and psychology on Clairmont's oeuvre. This calls for a consideration of the place of German Expressionism within Clairmont's aesthetic. These areas of interest emerge through his use of symbolism, also discussed in this chapter.

Clairmont's mother, Thelma, was raised in a Catholic orphanage, an experience which had a lasting effect on her and, later, on her younger son.[97] She did not attend a Catholic church after her brief marriage to Clairmont's father, Rex Haines, but she did maintain a strong affinity with the faith. As a solo mother, Thelma had a tremendous influence on Clairmont during his childhood and adolescence, shaping his love of art and exposing him to her beliefs. Consequently, Clairmont understood Catholicism (in part) via his mother. This creates an interesting juxtaposition in relation to *Moslem Virgin:* on the one hand is Thelma, an actual woman and Clairmont's mother; on the other hand is the Virgin Mary, an iconographic ideal of 'woman' and a symbol of 'motherhood'. For Clairmont, both these figures were strongly associated with Catholicism, although the latter dominates the imagery in *Moslem Virgin.* Later in his career, Clairmont attempted to merge the identities of Thelma and the

[96] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.163.

Virgin Mary in his work (see chapter five), but in the early 1970s, Clairmont portrayed only the 'idealised' mother. She appears lofty and removed, an effect heightened by the disturbing erasure of her facial features.

Clairmont was baptised Catholic but attended an Anglican Sunday School during his childhood. In adulthood, he rejected the church but retained a fascination with Catholicism, finding endless inspiration in its dramatic and emotive imagery. He displayed a small reproduction of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*, c1512-15, **(figure 7)** painted by Matthais Grünewald, and a rosary in his bedroom - obviously two treasured items.[98] He stated in 1980 that the Roman Catholic religion was a "tried and true theme art historically",[99] which suggests he was responding to the imagery of Catholicism, rather than its practice. *Moslem Virgin* is the product of Clairmont's life-long complex interraction with Catholicism. It is a highly personal and compelling interpretation of a very public icon. The bond between religion and art, known to Clairmont through his reading and art historical knowledge, creates a valuable context within which *Moslem Virgin* can be interpreted.

To understand Clairmont's work, one has to be familiar with early twentieth-century art and the ideas and theories which shaped it. Many of Clairmont's favourite European artists painted during the period 1885-1930 (van Gogh, Cézanne, Kirchner, Kandinsky, Beckmann, Kokoschka, Dali, Magritte, to name just a few). These artists worked in a variety of styles: for example, van Gogh considered his work Realist; Kirchner and Kandinsky were central to the German Expressionist movement; and Dali was a Surrealist. Despite the diversity of such influences, all these artists worked within a period marked by the "death of God".[100] Contemporaneous philosophy, psychology and religious belief fed into their imagery, influencing Clairmont forty years later in New Zealand.

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[97] Clairmont had an older brother, Brian, who moved out when Philip was in his early teens.
[98] Viki Clairmont, personal correspondence to author, 2nd November 1999.
[99] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters*, 1980, p.46.
[100] Paraphrasing Friedrich Nietzsche's comment "God is dead" (1880), see Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, The Sacred and The Arts*, 1986, p.81.

Figure 7: Matthias Grünewald, *The Crucifixion* (1515)
Centre panel of first stage from Isenheim Altarpiece
oil on wood, 2690mm x 3070mm
coll: Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar
(J.K. Huysmans, *Grünewald: the paintings,* p.16-17)

A major point of discussion during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the distinction between the so-called rational, tangible world of science and the irrational, esoteric realm of religion. The role of religion reached a crisis point at this time, although artists had been charting its decline for centuries. Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner argued that secularisation of eighteenth-century art was a direct consequence of the inadequacies of the church: "That the replacement of history painting by landscape had an ideological purpose directly related to the destruction of traditional religious and political values at the end of the eighteenth century cannot be doubted ... in 1802, the most brilliant and articulate of the young German painters, Philipp Otto Runge, identified the greatest achievement in art with a decline in religion".[101] The juxtaposition of the Virgin and the telegraph poles in *Moslem Virgin* may have been a reference to the incompatibility of science and religion (empiricism and faith). Similarly, the distortion of the Virgin's appearance suggests the threat to religion of technological expansion.

The separation of art from religion led to nostalgia for spirituality in the arts. Aniela Jaffé suggested in 1964 that "the interplay between religion and art is still alive".[102] Nicholas Usherwood contends that the "spiritual and intellectual upheavals" of the twentieth century have revived a need for the stability and certainty of the Old and New Testaments[103]. Many of the artists who inspired Clairmont turned to Biblical subject matter. Their interpretation, however, focused on the dramatic, profound, and timeless quality of Bible stories, rather than faith in the events. For example, the English painter Francis Bacon (1909-1992) influenced Clairmont (see chapter five), particularly his frequent use of the triptych format and depiction of the Cross. Bacon perversely rejected the religious connotations of each: he claimed his triptychs were inspired by cinema screens[104] and he portrayed crucified figures because "I'm fascinated by the body raised from the ground, it's more formal and abstract being elevated".[105]

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[101] Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: the Mythology of Nineteenth century Art,* 1984, p.51.
[102] Aniela Jaffé, Symbolism in the Visual Arts, in Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols,* 1964, 1972, p.232.
[103] Nicholas Usherwood, *The Bible in Twentieth Century Art,* 1987, p.5.
[104] Michael Leiris, *Francis Bacon,* 1987, p.12.
[105] Quoted in Hugh Davies and Sally Yard, *Francis Bacon,* 1986, p.12.

Despite the secularity of twentieth-century Western society, religion still had a role to play in the arts. *Moslem Virgin,* created in 1973, clearly demonstrates the continuing emotive potential of religious iconography and the powerful reaction it provokes in the viewer.

Psychologist Carl Jung argues that: "the idea of the 'death of God' and its immediate consequence, the 'metaphysical void', has troubled the minds of nineteenth century poets, especially in France and Germany. It was a long development that, in the twentieth century, reached the stage of open discussion and found expression in art. The cleavage between modern art and Christianity was complete".[106] Contrary to Jung's argument, however, is German Expressionism which spanned *c.*1905 - *c.*1920.[107] Expressionists drew repeatedly on religious imagery to convey heightened emotional experiences. Warwick Brown argues, "the essential elements of *the original expressionism* are all present in Clairmont's painting"[108] *[author's emphasis].* Clairmont was fascinated by German Expressionism, not subsequent reassessments which diluted and distorted the Expressionists' original intentions. Clairmont "found that whole expressionist thing came closest to the core of the matter. It made more sense to me (*sic*) to paint in an expressionist way".[109] Expressionism had a prevalent mystical component, caught at the turn of the century between the decline of religion and the ascent of science. This mystical aspect is often overlooked in relation to Clairmont's debt to Expressionism, despite the fact that it is a fundamental feature of his work and of particular significance to *Moslem Virgin.*

Rudolf Gopas, an art lecturer at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts (1959-1977) introduced Clairmont and his other students (most notably, Philip Trusttum, Philippa Blair, and Kura Te Waru-Rewiri) to German Expressionism. As Jonathan Mane-Wheoki explains, "[Gopas's] deep immersion in the writings and art of the German Expressionists formed the core

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[106] Aniela Jaffé, Symbolism in the Visual Arts, in Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols,* 1964, 1972, p.255.
[107] Jane Turner (ed.) *Dictionary of Art,* 1996, p.693.
[108] Warwick Brown, *100 New Zealand Paintings,* 1995, 1997, p.14.
[109] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters,* 1980, p.46.

of his teaching and art practice".[110] Gopas's ties with Expressionism were strengthened by his heritage; he was born in Siluté, near the "Baltic fishing village"[111] Nidden, where members of Die Brücke painted over the summer months c.1907-1912. His histrionic and erratic behaviour fitted New Zealand notions of the 'artistic temperament' and supported the local understanding of Expressionism, as Edmond illustrates: "When he lectured, Gopas's voice would shake and his body tremble with emotion. He was wild and strange and prepared to encourage the wildness and strangeness of others. In Clairmont's case he seems to have defined the terms of his art with terrifying clarity: he would seek order in a chaos so extreme it would threaten his sanity and, in the end, his life as well".[112]

Gopas' personal approach to art, as well as his appreciation of Expressionism, were extremely influential on the young Clairmont. Jim and Mary Barr explain his work as follows: "Gopas is trying to express the *inner reality* of nature in true expressionist style by brushstrokes and colour rather than by representing it and so defining it and limiting it"[113] [*author's emphasis*]. This interest in mysticism greatly affected Gopas' teaching although it must also be noted that Gopas rejected terms such as 'spiritual' and 'mystical'. Consequently, Clairmont was exposed to the esoteric qualities of Expressionism and absorbed the identity of the Expressionist artist who "stands for mysticism, self-examination, contemplation of the otherworldly and speculation on the infinite - expressed in terms of great feeling or emotive tensions".[114]

Within German Expressionism there were a variety of responses to religion. Franz Marc (1880-1916), a member of the Expressionist group Der Blaue Reiter, declared: "The art to come will be giving form to our *scientific* convictions. This is our *religion*, our centre of gravity, our truth. It will be profound enough and substantial enough to generate the greatest form, the

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[110] I am grateful to Jonathan Mane-Wheoki who provided me with this information.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.48.
[113] Jim and Mary Barr, *Rudolf Gopas,* 1982, p.29.
[114] Bernard S. Myers, *Expressionism, A Generation in Revolt,* 1963, p.43.

greatest transformation the world had ever seen"[115] [*author's emphases*]. Marc wanted to "creat[e] a truly meaningful art form capable of replacing the social and cultural void left empty by the widespread loss of religious belief...".[116] Although he was not Christian, he held mystical beliefs (discussed in chapter three). Art, not organised religion, was the means by which Marc intended to return spirituality to Germany. Emil Nolde (1867-1956), a member of Die Brücke, did not share Marc's religious sentiments, as Bernard Myers explains: "His feeling for religious themes especially was different from that of the semi-intellectual, mystical yearning reaction of most artists of that day. With Nolde, religion was a genuine part of his background and was not used merely as a theme for emotional expression".[117] Nolde often drew on the Old and New Testaments for inspiration, but, as Myers suggests, it was uncommon for an Expressionist to respond so strongly to organised religion: "Most expressionists [were] not interested in religion for its own sake but for its ecstatic possibilities".[118]

Of the Expressionists, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938) was the greatest influence on Clairmont. Kirchner was the "unacknowledged leader"[119] of Die Brücke (1905-1913), the Expressionist group recognised for its distinctive use of bold colour, distorted form, flattened perspective, and revival of the woodcut medium. Its original members included Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Fritz Bleyl and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff. They were joined in 1906 by Max Pechstein and Emil Nolde. Their motivation to paint went beyond style and subject matter; as Kirchner explained in 1923: "Their way of life, though strange to the ordinary man was not meant to shock; it was a pure and simple compulsion to integrate art and life".[120] Clairmont incorporated these ideas into his own identity as an artist; in 1980, he said, "My lifestyle hasn't really changed since I left art school... I doubt whether it ever will. It goes hand in hand with the painting. The two are quite inseparable – the way I live and the way I paint".[121]

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[115] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Rudolf Gopas,* 1982, p.36.
[116] Barry Herbert, *German Expressionism: Die Brucke and Der Blaue Reiter,* 1983, p.139.
[117] Bernard S. Myers, *Expressionism, A Generation in Revolt,* 1963, p.131.
[118] Ibid, p.74.
[119] Barry Herbert, *German Expressionism,* 1983, p.7.
[120] Quoted in Ibid, p.9.
[121] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters*, 1980, p.46.

Clairmont adopted many aspects of Die Brücke's style and philosophy. He experimented with woodcuts and linocuts (see chapter six). He also applied bright primary colours rapidly to the canvas (although his preferred medium was acrylic paints rather than oil which Die Brücke utilised), and distorted form. *Moslem Virgin* skillfully shows these visual markers of Expressionism: colour is crucial to the impact of the work. The dark background heightens the effect of the bright primary and secondary colours which threaten to engulf the Virgin. Vivid red stands out as the blood of the stigmata and the flame of the heart. Yellow is also particularly effective, glowing around both the halo and the heart. Purple is the most compelling colour: it dominates the composition and obscures the Virgin's face, allowing only one red-rimmed eye to stare back at the viewer. The colour purple brings to mind Papal and regal associations. Thelma had an aversion to purple, attributed to her upbringing in a Catholic orphanage,[122] making its use personally significance to Clairmont. He used colour instead of line to distort the image. Warping of shapes and perspective is more apparent in *Butterfly Mirror with Violet Flowers* **(figure 11)**. There is also a spiritual aspect in this work which goes beyond the subject matter. The intensity of the pulsating colour and rapid application of the paint imply the artist's urgency to vent his overwhelming and consuming emotions.

There is a particular Kirchner painting, *Self-Portrait as Soldier,* 1915, **(figure 8)** with which Clairmont strongly identified. It affected his examination of the artistic persona, his fascination with war and his personal mysticism. At the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, Clairmont had reproduced *Self-Portrait as Soldier* as part of a painting exercise. It was a favourite work[123] and despite his numerous changes of address and relocation in Waikanae, Wellington and Auckland, he kept it until his death. Clairmont was familiar with Kirchner's biography, particularly his service in the First World War and his fragile mental health. Kirchner suffered a nervous breakdown in 1916, resulting in his discharge from the army. He spent the following three years in sanatoria

[122] Viki Clairmont, personal correspondence to author, 3rd November 1999.
[123] Ibid.

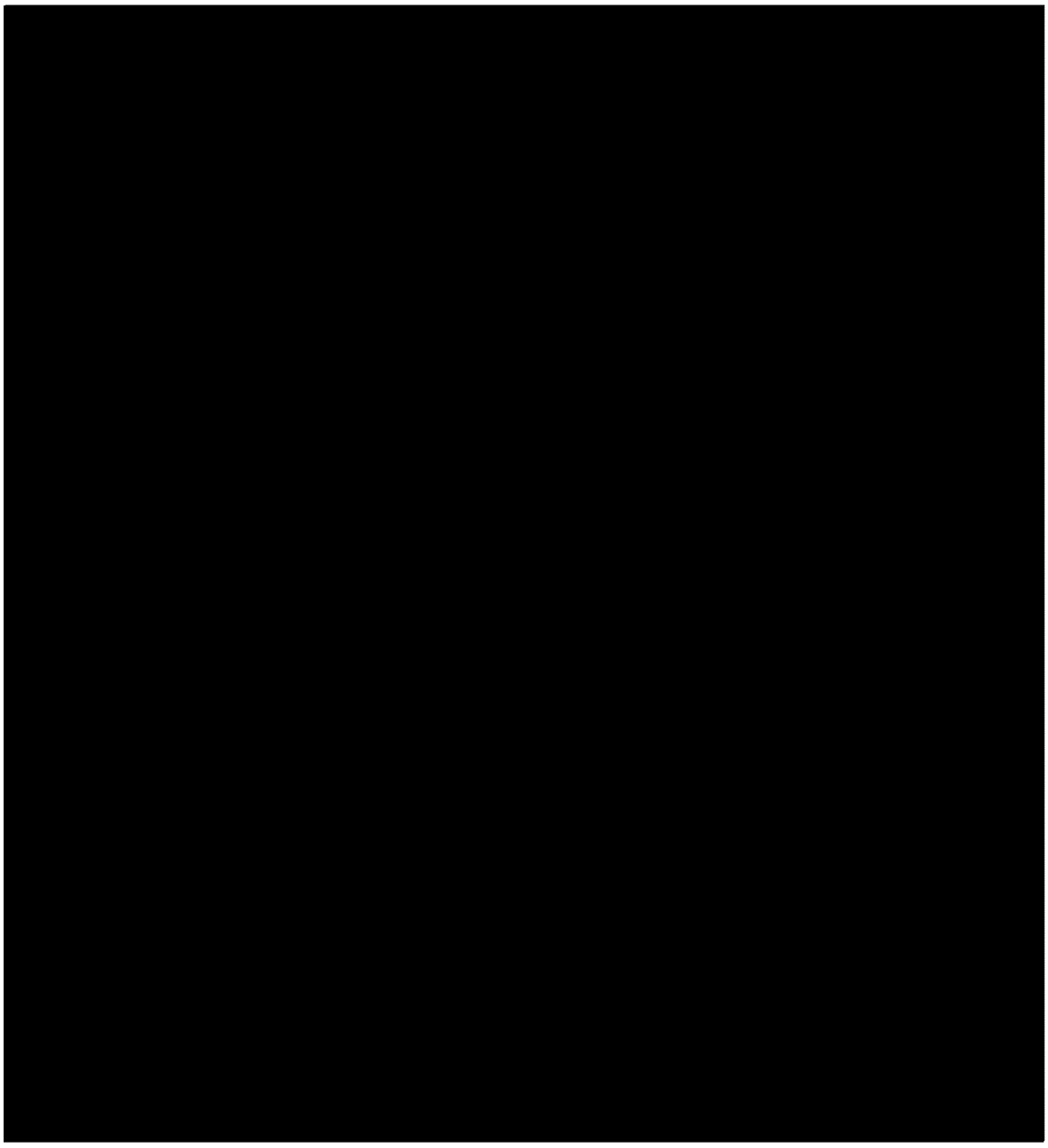

Figure 8: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self-Portrait (as Soldier)* (1915)
Oil on canvas, 678mm x 600mm
coll: Allen Art Museum, Ohio.
(Partsch, *Modern Art*, p.113)

before retreating to the isolation of an "alpine mountain cabin".[124] He continued to paint until his suicide in 1938, a drastic reaction to the growing power of the National Socialist party in Germany. Both Kirchner's breakdown and suicide recall the biography of van Gogh, another of Clairmont's favourite artists. Clairmont empathised with the tragic, Romantic life that these artists seem to have led and the suffering they apparently endured for their art.

Through Kirchner's role as a soldier, Clairmont could also examine war. Although the Expressionists experienced the First World War, Clairmont was intrigued by Nazi Germany and subsequently focused on the Second World War. Clairmont's painting, *Fireplace,* 1971, **(figure 9)** appears to represent the incineration of Jews within Nazi concentration camps. The Star of David, used by the Nazis to identify Jews during the Second World War, is placed in the centre of the fireplace. The fireplace itself resembles a concentration camp oven with its rounded outside edge, square mouth and white brick surface. The letters *SS*, written in the 'lightning bolt' style of Hitler's violent army corps, appear on the left hand side of the composition. Clairmont painted numerous works in response to the Second World War (*Degenerate Art Series,* 1974, **(see figure 10),** *War Requiem Series IV (Blitzkrieg),* 1974). His compassion for the persecuted victims of war had a parallel in his sympathy for the tortured artistic identities of Kirchner and van Gogh.

Clairmont's attraction to Kirchner was reinforced by Gopas who "told Clairmont he was the reincarnation of a Russian soldier who had died on the Eastern front during World War II and that the intricate, detailed dreams of battlefields Clairmont had were memories of that identity".[125] This statement has two implications. First, it brings the identities of Kirchner and Clairmont into closer harmony. Clairmont probably believed that he shared a bond with Kirchner via Expressionism and their experiences of war. Second, it demonstrates the openness with which both Gopas and Clairmont accepted reincarnation, a belief common to Hinduism, Buddhism and Theosophy.

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[124] Barry Herbert, *German Expressionism,* 1983, p.85.

Figure 9: Philip Clairmont, *Fireplace* (1971)
Acrylic on hessian, 18350mm x 36230mm
coll: Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch
(Barr, *Philip Clairmont*, p.20)

Figure 10: Philip Clairmont, *Quartet: The progress of / Destruction / And insanity / 1940-1945* (1974)
Degenerate Art Series, mixed media on card,
900 x 395mm, 880 x 395mm, 810 x 338mm, 810 x 300mm
coll: Clairmont estate
(Barr, *Philip Clairmont,* p.34)

Gopas's influence on Clairmont forms just one link in a longer chain created by art historians to track the development of expressionism within New Zealand. It is from this lineage that Clairmont and his work are ordinarily examined. In *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting,* 1971, Gil Docking traces expressionism in New Zealand back to the arrival of the Dutch painter, Petrus van der Velden (1837-1913), in 1890:

> With Rudolf Gopas thinking and teaching along these [expressionist] lines, he continued a Canterbury tradition which may partially account for the expressive modes used by a significant number of painters who have lived and trained in Christchurch. About sixty years before the arrival of Gopas in Christchurch, van ver Velden settled in the same city and introduced an expressionist style to New Zealand painting. But, more importantly, his philosophy was similarly creative; for van der Velden's favourite rubric was: "Colour is Light – Light is Love – Love is God and when you understand this you are an artist.[126]

Docking suggests that expressionism was a South Island phenomenon, a generalisation reinforced in the 1970s by the Christchurch artists Philip Trusttum, Alistair Nisbet-Smith, Tony Fomison, and, of course, Clairmont. Neil Rowe shares this understanding of New Zealand expressionism, claiming Clairmont was part of "what can almost be called the Christchurch expressionist school of painters".[127] It stands in stark contrast to the mystical concerns of figures such as Marc, Nolde, and Kirchner. The understanding of expressionism within New Zealand's art history is dominated by the artist's personality rather than spirituality. However, it is apparent in *Moslem Virgin* that Clairmont was drawn to the mysticism of German Expressionism (particularly the emotive use of colour) rather than the expressionist heritage in New Zealand.

Van der Velden was not the initial figure in the expressionist chain; his key antecedent, considered by many the father of Expressionism, was Vincent van

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[125] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.48.
[126] Gil Docking, *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting,* 1971, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1990, p.164.
[127] Neil Rowe, Erotic Furniture, *The Evening Post,* 16th May 1976.

Gogh. Van Gogh had met van ver Velden twice and had written of the artist to his brother, Theodore. This connection is invariably retold in accounts of van der Velden's career. Docking draws a parallel between the appearances of van Gogh and van der Velden, arguing that, "indeed, their physical appearances and personalities seemed to have been similar".[128] Such an assertion widens the scope of the term 'Expressionism'; it is no longer a style of painting, confined to the canvas, but a reflection of the artist's persona. Van Gogh's mental illness and violent temperament are part of a well-established myth. It appears that his expressionist 'descendants' in New Zealand inherited not only his use of colour and line, but his lifestyle as well, as Michael Dunn demonstrated when he wrote the following of Clairmont: "The characteristics can be traced back easily enough to Van Gogh. Embodied are the notions of the painter as an outsider figure, a person who does not conform to social norms and expectations. The painting is not about the objective world but the subjective responses of the painter".[129]

Personal symbolism has yet to be discussed in relation to *Moslem Virgin.* It was the means by which Clairmont conveyed religious influences and cited artistic precedents. Clairmont also adapted religious symbolism to hold a personal significance, as Rowe has observed: "His work bears little relation to any orthodox religious belief. He converts standard iconic imagery to the needs of his own savage personal vision".[130] The majority of Clairmont's paintings hinge on the interplay between the appearance of an object and the sub-text of its meaning for the artist. The adept and subtle use of symbolism in his work shows a knowledge of theoretical constructs formulated by Carl Jung, who defined a symbol as: "a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from

[128] Gil Docking, *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting,* 1971, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1990, p.72.
[129] Michael Dunn, Painting Since 1970, in Gil Docking, *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting,* 1971, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1990, p.207.
[130] Neil Rowe, Erotic Furniture, *The Evening Post,* 16th May 1976.

us".[131] Peter Cape, writing about New Zealand art in 1979, makes reference to Jung and his use of religion to explain the impact of symbolism:

How, though, does one recognise the archetypal content of a dream or a painting? Fundamentally, Jung says, because of the *numinous* power of the images or symbols. *Numinous* was a term coined by the Protestant theologian Rudolf Otto to describe the non-rational feeling which is experienced in religion as the 'holy', a feeling in which awe and self-abasement are combined with a deep sense of fascination. Applied to a symbol or an image, the term indicates that it contains a deep and positive emotive charge.[132]

Clairmont wanted to capture a "numinous" quality in his imagery. In *Moslem Virgin*, symbolism deepens the religious significance of an already devotional image of the Virgin Mary. The telegraph poles that Mary holds, one in each hand, initially jar against the context of a religious painting. This strange juxtaposition was probably intentional. Although the telegraph poles refer to the modern age, they may have several meanings in this work. Jim and Mary Barr suggest that the telegraph poles symbolise communication,[133] which is compatible with several of Clairmont's other works. In a statement accompanying the *War Drobes* exhibition (shown in the Elva Bett Gallery[134] in 1976), Clairmont declared, "wardrobes have many associations including: coffins, confessional booths and implications that are fairly obvious - confinement and lack of communication".[135] In 1979, he explored the theme of communication again in *Telephone Triptych*, a work which has 'Crisis' written across the left-hand panel. These later works are concerned with the breaking down of communication; this appears to be the case with *Moslem Virgin* as well.

The telegraph poles are cruciform. Crucifixes appeared repeatedly in Clairmont's work, a fascination which dated back to his teenage years. The Cross was for Clairmont both a reference to Christianity and a reminder of the

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[131] Carl Jung, Approaching the Unconscious, in *Man and His Symbols,* 1964, 1972, p.20.
[132] Peter Cape, *New Zealand Painting since 1960,* 1979, p.33.
[133] Jim and Mary Barr, *Philip Clairmont*, 1987, p.27.
[134] The Bett Duncan Studio Gallery became the Elva Bett Gallery in 1975.

works of Bacon, Grünewald, Velásquez, and Beckmann. A symbol such as the Cross also evokes a variety of visions to a person on LSD; one can witness the events of the Passion or the Crusades, or possibly look inward, to some personal experience of "guilt and redemption".[136] Several further aspects of *Moslem Virgin* support an interpretation of the telegraph poles as symbols of the Crucifixion. The oak, for example, which seems to grow from one of the poles, is a recognised Christian symbol: "[It] was one of several species of trees that were looked upon as the trees from which the cross was made".[137] Clairmont used both plants and flowers for their symbolic meaning in a number of works; it was yet another way of examining layers of reality and meaning. The stigmata on the Virgin's hands also allude to the Crucifixion. Although *Moslem Virgin* is an overt image of the Virgin Mary, Christ is present in the symbolic references to his death on the Cross. Clairmont could portray the life of Christ in one image, from his conception to his death, by using symbolism to condense time. Many Renaissance paintings of the Virgin and Child include a symbol of death held by Jesus, foreshadowing future events. In *Moslem Virgin*, it is Mary who forewarns of Christ's death (ie. the telegraph poles). Understanding Renaissance pictorial practices and the symbolic function of plants and flowers reveals many 'realities' that are not readily apparent in Clairmont's imagery.

Generally speaking, the imagery of *Moslem Virgin* functions on two levels. The first and most apparent level of meaning is easily accessible to the viewer: the work shows the division between religion (represented by the Virgin) and contemporary society (represented by the telegraph poles and non-traditional depiction of the Virgin). *Moslem Virgin* possibly refers to the perceived redundancy of religion since the turn of the twentieth century, or contrarily, the continuing relevance of religious imagery in twentieth-century art. The artist's debt to German Expressionism is readily apparent (particularly his use of colour) which draws attention to art historical influences and adds a mystical dimension to the work. The second, more obscure level of meaning was

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[135] Alan Brunton, *Spleen*, 4th July 1976, no pagination.
[136] Robert Masters and Jean Houston, *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, 1966, 1972, p.221.

comprehensible only to Clairmont. The use of colour and the symbolism of the telegraph poles had particular significance for the artist but not the audience. Similarly, Thelma must have also influenced Clairmont's exploration of Catholicism, but exactly how this is expressed in the image is unclear. Interpretations of *Moslem Virgin* are restricted by Clairmont's highly personal, and therefore inaccessible, use of symbolism. Fortunately, the viewer is not disadvantaged too greatly. The rich colour, dynamic application of paint, and complex interaction of religious and secular images in *Moslem Virgin* promote contemplation and offer a wealth of possible interpretations.

[137] George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art,* 1954, 1955, p.43.

Figure 11: Philip Clairmont, *Butterfly Mirror with Violet Flowers* (1974)
Acrylic on hessian, 882mm x 802mm
coll: Aymard Bradley, Wellington
(University of Canterbury Fine Arts Slide Collection)

Chapter Three: Butterfly Mirror with Violet Flowers (1974)

Butterfly Mirror with Violet Flowers, 1974 **(figure 11)** is an exploration of alternative realities, a preoccupation Clairmont had throughout his career. In 1970, he wrote: "I have dwelt on and emphasised those ambiguities which have arisen out of the process of creating an image and may reveal something of another reality... of those submerged realities behind and beyond normal consciousness".[138] In 1980, he reiterated his approach: "The main thing is to bring out the essence of the object for the viewer. The reality behind the surface of appearances".[139] Clairmont's interest in alternative realities is the result of his broad knowledge of drugs, art, religion, and psychology. Each of these areas has already been discussed in reference to *Buddha Vietnam* and *Moslem Virgin.* The common denominator in these works (and the subject of this discussion) is the belief in a 'true' reality outside everyday perception. *Butterfly Mirror* goes far beyond an image of a bedroom mirror and a vase of flowers; it is a philosophical discussion on the nature of our surroundings.

Clairmont saw his works as a reflection of himself. He explained, "If I paint a chair, my reaction to it and how I feel about it becomes the thing. So in a way each painting is a self-portrait".[140] Similarly, Martin Edmond believes that *Scarred Couch (The Auckland Experience),* 1978, **(figure 12)** reveals much about the artist. Apparently, Clairmont painted *Scarred Couch* "whilst recovering from an operation to remove his appendix; the scars are also those of psychic wounds he felt the Auckland art scene had inflicted upon him".[141] Anthropomorphism, the 'humanising' of inanimate objects, and pantheism, the belief that all objects possess a spiritual and living component, are two concepts that appear frequently in Clairmont's work. Their association with organised religions such as Judaism and Christianity was another means by which Clairmont examined both mainstream and minority forms of religion simultaneously.

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[138] Philip Clairmont, *An Exercise in Perception*, 1970, no pagination.
[139] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters,* 1980, p.40.
[140] Ibid, p.46.
[141] Martin Edmond, Some Enquiries into the Matter of Philip Clairmont, *Landfall*, 1994, no.188, p.286,

Figure 12: Philip Clairmont, *Scarred Couch: the Auckland Experience* (1978)
Oil on hessian, 15900mm x 27600mm
coll: Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington
(Cover: National Art Gallery Diary 1984)

Of Clairmont's many interests, the use of hallucinogenic drugs offered strongest support for his belief in alternative realities. As we have seen, drug use was an important part of the hippy culture to which Clairmont belonged. Although Clairmont had been exposed to the mystical ideas of Huxley, Leary, and Ginsberg, his predominant concern was 'true' realities which cannot be accessed without drugs. The term 'psychedelic' was coined in 1957 by Humphrey Osmond and defined as follows: "A psychedelic compound is one like LSD or mescaline which enriches the mind and enlarges the vision. It is this kind of experience which provides the greatest possibility for examining those areas most interesting to psychiatry, and which has provided men down the ages with experiences they have considered valuable above all others".[142]

Those who did not use drugs interpreted their use as an escape from reality, but for those who did use drugs, it was a means of going further into reality, as D. Solomon explains: "My first psychedelic experience was triggered by 400 milligrams of mescaline sulphate. It did indeed induce a flight but instead of fleeing from reality, I flew more deeply into it... my exponentially heightened awareness saw through the static, one-dimensional, ego-constricted, false front which is the consciousness-constructed reality of the everyday world".[143] Drugs were not considered the source of alternative realities *per se*. A side effect of psychedelic drugs is the sensation of hyper-reality. Consequently, drugs seemed to promote higher levels of perception, rather than distort normal brain functioning: "[Commited drug users] argue that the psychedelic experience is not a distortion of reality; rather, the reality of the normal world is an illusion that the drug experience reveals".[144] Clairmont would have believed drugs allowed him to view the 'true' objects which he painted for *Butterfly Mirror. Buddha Vietnam* was also painted as a drug-induced vision, but the later work appears more coherent. There are readily comprehensible layers of symbolism and meaning in *Butterfly Mirror* which are unrecognisable in *Buddha Vietnam.* Clairmont may have used drugs either less frequently or in smaller quantities at this time, resulting in refined detail.

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[142] Kenneth Leech, *Youthquake,* 1973, p.48.
[143] Quoted in Anton C Zijderveld, *The Abstract Society: A Cultural Analysis of Our Time,* 1970, 1972, p.99.

As demonstrated in *Buddha Vietnam*, the relationship between the drug-using younger generation and the church-going parental generation was strained. When approached from Clairmont's perspective, religion and drug use share much common ground. M. Hill defined religion in 1973: "The set of beliefs which postulate and seek to regulate the distinction between an empirical reality and a related and significant supra-empirical segment of reality; the language and symbols which are used in relation to this distinction; and the activities and institutions which are concerned with its regulation".[145] This definition has three parts. The latter two are visible in both drug culture and organised religion. The first point is most relevant to this discussion.

The concept of an earthly, "empirical reality" and a heavenly "supra-empirical segment of reality" have strong parallels in the drug culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Huxley quoted Eastern religions to justify drug-use but his philosophies were inspired by William Blake, the eighteenth-century artist and poet. Huxley recommended: "one of the things that should be read to a person under LSD is Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell".[146] Huxley brought fame to one particular passage of this text (mentioned in the Introduction):

> If the doors of perception were cleansed everything
> would appear to man as it is - infinite.
> For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things
> through narrow chinks of his cavern.[147]

The mirror in *Butterfly Mirror* implies the 'opening up' of perception. It possibly represents the gateway which drugs unlock, suggesting alternatives within the frame of the mirror just as Clairmont has suggested alternatives within the frame of the composition. On LSD, Clairmont believed that the genuine nature of objects came forward, as Tony Geddes explains: "When he'd taken LSD he said that it enabled him to sort out what was true and what was false. He said "I had no idea how stupid motor cars looked"... whereas something [natural]

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[144] W. David Watts Jnr, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Sociological Study*, 1971, p.60.
[145] Quoted in Nola Ker, *Religion and Society in Interaction in New Zealand*, 1984, p.vi.
[146] Aldous Huxley, Brave New World Revisited, (1956) in *Moksha*, 1980, p.114.
[147] W.H. Stevenson (ed), *Blake: the Complete Poems*, 1971, 1989, p.114.

which... glowed with its own inner fires... [was] along the right drug-fuelled lines... He saw [artificial] objects revealing themselves as absurd and pointless".[148]

Psychedelic art, influenced by drug-induced visions, recalls the expressionist understanding of the environment: "The art is religious, a mystical, pantheistic religion, God manifest in All, but especially in the primordial energy that makes the world's (*sic*) go, powers the existential flux. Nature or body mysticism: the One as an omnisensate Now. Occasionally, more profound awarenesses".[149] Although it was a product of the 1960s, psychedelic art combined religious and psychological ideologies in a manner first seen at the turn of the century: "the psychedelic journey inward results in religious art erupting into ecstasy or revealing the rich, multi-dimensionality of consciousness".[150] Clairmont's use of vibrant colour and swirling energetic lines may have also been influenced by psychedelic art. Although it now appears kitsch, during the early 1970s, there was great enthusiasm for this new style to convey the spirit of the age. Masters and Houston, writing about psychedelic art in 1968, stated that, "we are witnessing the primitive beginnings but already the outlook is great".[151] Clairmont was also optimistic about the future of psychedelic art: Tony Geddes recalls Clairmont expressing the opinion that "to ignore drugs was to ignore the next stage of artistic development".[152]

Due to the unpopularity of psychedelic art today, this association with Clairmont is often overlooked. When psychedelia was mentioned during the backlash of the 1980s, it was seen as a negative, distracting influence. In 1987, for example, Pat Unger argued that in Clairmont's work, "...the psychedelic indulgences of the hippy cult and the philosophies of Jimi Hendrix are borrowed to convolute and decorate all feelings. For an artist who has had his work interpreted with reference to his drug dependence and resulting lifestyle, there

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[148] Tony Geddes, interview with author, 17th June 1999.
[149] Robert Masters and Jean Houston, *Psychedelic Art,* 1968, p.81.
[150] Ibid, p.87.
[151] Ibid, p.81.
[152] Tony Geddes, interview with author, 17th June 1999.

is not in evidence any befuddled rambling, usually associated with diminished control. His power of recall must have been great".[153]

Moving on to the role of the object in this work, Clairmont's broad art historical knowledge also influenced his exploration of other realities. Paul Klee (1879-1940) believed other worlds were experienced sensually, not visually: "The object expands beyond the bounds of its appearance by our knowledge that the thing is more than its exterior presents to our eyes".[154] Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), a member of the Italian surrealist art movement *Pittura Metafisica, c.*1910-1922, expressed a similar view: "The painter-poet feels that what is true, immutable and essential stems from the unseen".[155] In light of these artists' statements, it is likely that Clairmont was responding to artistic as well as drug-induced influences when he painted *Butterfly Mirror.* A belief that life exists in all matter and a strong art historical precedent may have prompted Clairmont to examine these ideas himself.

The members of Der Blaue Reiter felt a far greater sympathy for pantheism than Die Brücke. The co-founder with Franz Marc of Der Blaue Reiter, Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) explained his pantheistic beliefs and their importance in art. He believed, "Every object (whether a natural form or man-made) has its own life and therefore its own potency; we are continually being affected by spiritual potency".[156] Kandinsky considered Cézanne an important artist: "He painted things as he painted human beings because he was endowed with the gift of divining the internal life in everything".[157] Whilst living in Munich, Kandinsky established three art societies: in 1901 he established *Phalanx*, an exhibiting society which disbanded only a few years later in 1904; in 1909, he established the *Neue Künstlervereinigung*; and in 1911 he established Der Blaue Reiter with Franz Marc. He spent the latter part of his career employed at the Bauhaus, the German design institute which promoted

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[153] Pat Unger, Philip Clairmont Exhibition, *The Press,* 21st December 1987.
[154] Quoted in Aniela Jaffé, Symbolism in the Visual Arts, in Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols,* 1964, 1972, p.254.
[155] Carlo Carrà, The Quadrant of the Spirit, in Massimo Carrà, *Metaphysical Art,* 1968, 1971, p.75.
[156] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* 1912, 1947, 1955, p.50.
[157] Ibid, p.36.

the aesthetic of "form follows function", and taught his personal and spiritual approach to colour and form in a very structured way.

Kandinsky promoted the representative potential of colour, which was "thought to have universally symbolic associations with certain spiritual and emotional states".[158] Passages of Kandinsky's famous work, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* 1912, were recited by Gopas to his classes when Clairmont was a student.[159] Clairmont learnt from Kandinsky the "... legitimate and illegitimate combinations of colours, the shock of contrasting colours, the silencing of one colour by another, the sounding of one colour through another, the checking of fluid colour spots by contours of design, the overflowing of these contours, the mingling and the sharp separation of surfaces, all these open great vistas of purely pictorial possibility".[160] Kandinsky strove to paint the "colour of sound",[161] hoping to express music visually. There is an interesting parallel in drug use. A side-effect of opium is synaesthesia: "the exchange of sense perceptions, by which colours are heard and smelt and sounds are seen and tasted".[162] Clairmont possibly empathised with Kandinsky's colour theories due to similar experiences on opium. Marc was also obsessed by the symbolic characteristics of colour: "Blue is the male principle, stern and spiritual. Yellow, the female principle, gentle, cheerful and sensual. Red is matter, brutal and heavy and always the colour which must be fought and vanquished by the other two".[163]

German Expressionists expressed their pantheistic beliefs by exploring the natural world. Marc declared: "Today we search behind the veil of external appearances for the hidden things of nature ... we seek and we paint ... this spiritual side of ourselves in nature".[164] In comparison, members of *Pittura Metafisica*, looked to ordinary and everyday objects; a focus comparable with Clairmont's interest in domestic subject matter (*Butterfly Mirror* is a typical

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158 K.J. Furniss, *Rudolf Gopas*, 1987, p.56.
159 Ibid, p.56.
160 Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* 1912, 1947, 1955, p.66.
161 Denys Trussell, *Alan Pearson: His Life and Art,* 1991, p.71.
162 Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*, 1968, p.45.
163 Quoted in Susanna Partsch, *Franz Marc*, 1991, p.26.
164 Denys Trussell, *Alan Pearson: His Life and Art*, 1991, p.49.

example). Massimo Carrà describes how the artists of *Pittura Metafisica* viewed their surroundings:

There was something disquieting about the way an inanimate object, seemingly withdrawn into its solemn steadfastness, could affect human emotions. Any old thing forgotten in a corner, if the eye dwelt on it, acquired an eloquence of its own, communicating its lyricism and magic to the kindred soul. If a neglected object of this kind were forcibly isolated, that is, divested of its warmth and of the protective coat of the environment, or even ironically combined with completely unrelated things, it would reassert its dignity in the new context and stand there, incomprehensible, weird, mysterious.[165]

Symbolism has already been discussed in relation to *Moslem* Virgin. It was defined by Jung and examined in light of art historical and religious concerns. However, symbolism is also relevant to this discussion as it is a valuable means of suggesting alternative realities. Because the meaning of a symbol goes beyond its visual appearance, it can be used to convey esoteric notions otherwise visually unattainable. As mentioned earlier, colour was used by both Marc and Kandinsky to capture sensations beyond visual perception. Similarly, Edmond claims, "In Clairmont's mythology of the interior, the sink was associated with death; like the mirror, *a gateway into other dimensions*. Death was not extinction but a release"[166] [*author's emphasis*]. This understanding of the mirror in Clairmont's work is consistent with the 'alternative realities' theme in *Butterfly Mirror.*

Clairmont also understood symbolism via religion and used this influence frequently in his work. The vase, for example, is a Christian symbol of fertility and growth and is another attribute of the Virgin.[167] Clairmont painted many vases of flowers at this time (*Vase of Geraniums,* 1972/73, *Vase of Irises,* 1973, *Vase of Chrysanthemums (with Gauguin's Yellow Christ,* 1975) and was aware of the symbolic meaning of these flowers. The *Tibetan Book of the Dead* lists

[165] Massimo Carrà, *Metaphysical Art,* 1968, 1971, p.19.
[166] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.150.
[167] Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery,* 1974, p.485.

the five symbols of the "five excellent sensual things".[168] A vase of flowers symbolises the sense of smell. A mirror symbolises the sense of sight and is also "symbolic of the body, which reflects all phenomena or sensations".[169] Clairmont may have chosen his symbolic forms in *Butterfly Mirror* as a response to both Eastern and Western religions.

In *Butterfly Mirror with Violet Flowers,* the flower variety is not apparent in the painted image. However, Clairmont identified the flower by name in the title, suggesting a particular relevance. Ferguson describes the violet as a "symbol of humility... it is also used to denote the humility of the Son of God in assuming human form".[170] For Clairmont, the violet probably symbolised the dual nature of Christ. He possibly painted the crucifixion for the same reason; because the Crucifixion of Christ encapsulated both divinity and humanity. The second vase of violets left of the central composition is puzzling. Just as the choice of flower is important, it is likely that its dual appearance is also significant. It may be another reference to alternative realities. The colour violet seems to have also held symbolic meaning for Clairmont. As mentioned in chapter two, it is a colour associated with the Catholic church.

The mirror reinforces the symbolism of the violets and conveys the dual worlds of reality and reflection. Clairmont often used mirrors in his work, as he explained to Hamish Keith in 1981: "I like what mirrors do to a confined area. I like the way mirrors reflect, obviously, you get a left to right situation. It's invaluable looking at paintings through a mirror, to see the painting in reverse, because you get the other hemisphere of the old brain. And I feel that painting... mirrors reality in a way".[171] *Butterfly Mirror* was part of an exhibition at the Bett Duncan Studio Gallery in 1974 simply titled *Mirrors.* The tripartite division of a butterfly mirror suggests the triptych format, developed by Clairmont a year later for the exhibition *War Drobes.* Open wardrobe doors

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[168] W.Y. Evans-Wentz (ed), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead,* 1927, 1949, 1957, 1960, p.22.
[169] Ibid, p.22.
[170] George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art,* 1954, 1955, p.52.
[171] Philip Clairmont, interview with Hamish Keith, 9th March, 1981.

create an effect similar to that of the butterfly mirror: "three different types of space".[172]

Clairmont felt a strong association between the content of his work and its relationship with both his immediate domestic environment and the hyper-real realms beyond. This fascination went directly against contemporary trends in art which were ruled by theories of significant form and Modernist painting. Significant form was defined by English art critic Clive Bell in 1913 to explain the purpose of art: "According to this doctrine, form itself is the true content of the work of art, and other kinds of content (eg: narrative and symbolic) are secondary".[173] Clement Greenberg's famous treatise *Modernist Painting*, first published in 1961, declared: "Realistic, naturalistic art has dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art; Modernism uses art to call attention to art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting - the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of pigment... under Modernism these same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors".[174]

As a student at the University of Canterbury, it is likely that Clairmont learnt of significant form and Modernist painting, although their influence on his work is practically nonexistent. Clairmont's dependence on symbolism went against Bell's emphasis on significant form. Clairmont's preference for figurative imagery rejected Greenberg's argument. Despite these discrepancies, Clairmont's work did share some common ground with Modernism. A fundamental aspect of abstraction is liberation from the constraints of objective reality. Harrison and Wood defined Modernism as categorically opposed to Realism and therefore: "Art... is an exemplary realm. What might be done, seen, experienced within this realm would have critical bearing upon the actual conditions of social existence, but only in so far as art maintained a moral independence from those conditions".[175] Modernism promoted the individual

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[172] Quoting Philip Clairmont in Jim and Mary Barr's *Contemporary New Zealand Painters,* 1980, p.46.
[173] Edward Lucie-Smith, *Dictionary of Art Terms,* 1984, p.172.
[174] Clement Greenberg, Modernist Painting, in Francis Frascina and Jonathon Harris (eds.), *Art in Modern Culture: an anthology of critical texts,* 1992, p.309.
[175] Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas,* 1992, p.2.

and her/his interior thought processes and experiences; abstraction provided a means of portraying those experiences without reference to the external environment. In a similar vein, Clairmont also used introspection, relying on his unconscious to provide artistic inspiration. He also avoided direct visual representation, prefering to symbolise his thoughts in as much the same way as Modernists abstracted their own. Abstraction allowed artists to explore worlds beyond the reality of appearances, a central component of Clairmont's work.

For Clairmont, both drugs and art provided access to other worlds as depicted in *Butterfly Mirror.* Naturally, religion also shares this trait. Characteristically, Clairmont's interest in the alternative realities offered by organised religion had strong affinities with art history. For example, pantheistic beliefs appeared in artists' manifestos and paintings, and originated in religion. Clairmont claimed in 1978: "Paint has a life of its own if you're tuned to it".[176] Both Eastern religions and Christianity in the West have been discussed previously in some detail. The 'religions' discussed here are more accurately described as mystical beliefs and are integral to the theme of alternative realities. It will be shown that these ancient ideas are also manifest in some organised religions.

Many (secular) artists interpreted pantheism as the life force in objects. As a belief system it is defined as, "God is everything and everything is God. The world is either identical with God or in some way a self-expression of His nature".[177] Panpsychism and animism derive from pantheism. Panpsychists "do not attribute consciousness to inanimate things, but only mental or protomental properties".[178] Animists, in comparison, believe that everything (be it a rock or a person) possesses both a life and a soul.[179] Pantheism, panpsychism, and animism are more closely aligned to mysticism than organised religion, but these ideas are present in established, ancient religious practices. Jung, for example, explains the recurring presence of animism in Buddhist texts: "... every tree and grove, and every locality, is held to have its

[176] Quoted in Ross Fraser, Philip Clairmont Paints a Triptych, *Art New Zealand no.11,* Spring 1978, p.41.
[177] Michael Levine, *Pantheism: a Non-theistic Concept of Deity,* 1994, p.1.
[178] Ibid, p.115.
[179] Ibid, p.114.

own peculiar deities; and the Buddha is represented as discoursing with Gods and other spiritual beings, inhabiting the Earth and the realms beyond, as if that were a most natural procedure".[180]

Van Gogh incorporated pantheism into his paintings as a result of his devout Christian faith. Ködera demonstrates this point by quoting a "Nature Sermon" delivered by Charles Haddon in 1854: "Flowers, what are they? They are but the thoughts of God solidified, God's beautiful thoughts put into shape. Storms, what are they? They are God's terrible thoughts written out that we may read them... the world is just the materialising of God's thoughts".[181] Haddon also drew parallels between the four seasons and the four evangelists.[182]

Judaism contains elements of pantheism. According to Haftmann, it is present in the work of Marc Chagall: "The gentle sadness of this art, its poetic exploration of the world of objects, brings to mind the Hassidic legend of the world as a vessel that shattered into a million fragments because it was too full of divine love, each fragment becoming a thing which still preserves a spark of God's love".[183] Chagall painted each object as a reflection of "the divine presence".[184] Theosophy is similar to Judaism in this way: a belief that God is present in everything: "There is nothing in the universe that is not some kind of expression of His life. It may be at the human, at the animal, at the vegetable, or only at the mineral level of evolution, but it is none the less an expression of the life of the Supreme Being".[185] Helena Blavatsky wrote the tenets of theosophy in 1888, entitled *The Secret Doctrine.* This work was distributed extensively and was fundamental to the artistic philosophies of Kandinsky and Der Blaue Reiter.

These varied religious practices and beliefs illustrate the concept that everything possesses some form of life with which people can communicate. Via artists such as Chagall, Kandinsky and van Gogh, Clairmont inherited a

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[180] W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 1927, 1949, 1957, 1960, p.lvii.
[181] Quoted in Tsukasa Ködera, *Vincent Van Gogh: Christianity versus Nature*, 1990, p.22.
[182] Ibid, p.22.
[183] Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century,* 1961, 1965, 1968, p.260.
[184] Ibid, p.262.

strong pantheistic quality in his work. Similarly, his interest in religions such as Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity would have reinforced these sympathies. Clarimont's relationship with religion was more complex than simply painting crucifixes. Of the many influences from which he drew inspiration, the underlying feature which they have in common is a strong spirituality and an ability to move beyond everyday experience.

Psychologists have argued that pantheism is a form of anthropomorphism, that artists were not portraying the life in objects but a reflection of themselves. Aniela Jaffé explains, "What the artists, like the alchemists, probably did not realise was the psychological fact that they were projecting part of their psyche into matter or inanimate objects. Hence the 'mysterious animation' that entered into such things, and the great value even attached to rubbish. They projected their own darkness, their earthly shadow, a psychic content that they and their time had lost and abandoned".[186] Clairmont adopted both the psychological concept of anthropomorphism and the spiritual belief of pantheism. He said, "I put a lot of myself into the objects I paint".[187] The appearance of Clairmont's double signature in *Butterfly Mirror*, particularly its second appearance on the hand-mirror, suggests the reflection of the artist in the objects he portrayed. He spoke of domestic objects as self-portraits because so much of himself was expressed in the images. But there is also sympathy for pantheism in Clairmont's discussions of his work. In *Butterfly Mirror,* the mirror is an exploration of different types of space; it does not simply reflect the room but distorts it and goes deeper into the scene. Clairmont wanted to reveal other realities and the life that exists in objects, an idea which he adopted from artists such as Gopas, Kandinsky and Klee and was supported by his drug use.

Butterfly Mirror successfully draws together many approaches to the exploration of consciousness and perception, enabling a wealth of possible interpretations. The work can be viewed as a domestic still life, as a product of drug-induced

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[185] L.W. Rogers, *Elementary Theosophy,* 1929, 1956, p.17.
[186] Aniela Jaffé, Symbolism In the Visual Arts, in Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols,* 1964, 1972, p.254.
[187] Quoted in Ross Fraser, Philip Clairmont Paints a Triptych, *Art New Zealand no.11,* Spring 1978, p.41.

visions, as a glimpse 'behind the veil', as an expressionist effort to reveal the essence of objects, and as a psychological examination of the unconscious. There is also the symbolic component: each object has both an appearance and a meaning, an idea compatible with the overall theme of this work. All these ideas feed into Clairmont's work. Although the major influences are drug culture and art history, the ideas themselves are highly spiritual which creates a link with religion and, as a product of the time, the additional connection with psychology.

Figure 13: Philip Clairmont, *Light source* (1978)
Oil and acrylic on jute canvas, 1620mm x 940mm
coll: Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland
(Card: Auckland City Art Gallery)

Chapter Four: Light source (1978)

In the preceding chapters, various social and political trends which occurred in New Zealand during the 1960s and 1970s have been considered in some detail. Similarly, art historical concerns and European influences on Clairmont have also been raised. An important area yet to be investigated is Clairmont's position within New Zealand art history. An early Auckland work, *Light source,* 1978, **(figure 13)** offers the opportunity to do this. It was to be the right hand panel of a staircase triptych which Clairmont never completed.[188] The first part of this discussion focuses on the work itself, examining the major themes which have been developed so far (drugs, religion, art). The second part of this discussion explores the religious character of *Lightsource* relative to three New Zealand artists known for their activity in that field: Colin McCahon (1919-1987) and (discussed more briefly) Tony Fomison and Nigel Brown. Rita Angus (1908-1970) and Lois White (1903-1984) are also relevant to this discussion as religious imagery and spirituality were essential features of their work.

Light source shows a bare bulb hanging before ceiling beams which suggest a crucifix. Although the bulb is the focal point, the cruciform is the core of the work; all other aspects centre around an understanding of this work as a religious image. Clairmont frequently depicted the Crucifixion in his works. It was present symbolically in *Moslem Virgin.*[189] It was present explicitly in *Buddha Vietnam* and appears again in *Self-Portrait at 33* **(figure 37)**. It is a tiny detail in still-lifes (see *Window,* 1976, **(figure 14)** for example) and an overbearing icon in major painted works (see *Crucifixion Triptych,* 1975, **(figure 15)**). Of its many uses in Clairmont's work, the crucifix is most interesting when it appears implicitly in works such as *Light source.*

Clairmont added a further layer of meaning to his work when he used religious imagery implicitly. For example, the Cross is two lines intersecting at right angles; it is also where Jesus was crucified; it is also a symbol for Christianity, forgiveness, and redemption. When this form was used by Clairmont as the

[188] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont*, 1999, p.160.

Figure 14: Philip Clairmont, *Window* (1976)
Gouache, pastel, pen and black ink on paper
coll: Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington
(Index, Hector Library, Te Papa)

Figure 15: Philip Clairmont, *Crucifixion: a triptych* (1975)
Oil and acrylic on board, 1210mm x 910mm, 575mm, 870mm
coll: Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt
(Johnston, *Anxious Images,* p.13)

basis of a clothesline (in *Clothesline in a Canterbury Nor'Wester,* 1973, **(figure 16)**) a new set of associations and ideas were added. Crucifixes appear implicitly in Clairmont's work as clotheslines, ceiling beams and window sashes (see *Window,* 1978, **(figure 17)** and *Window Still-Life,* 1983, **(figure 18)** for example). Moreover, these fairly mundane scenes of domestic life jar with the supposed reverence of the original meaning of the Crucifixion. This appears to be a key aspect of Clairmont's religious works. Even in his explicit use of religious imagery, the family home is often present. The wardrobe series is a combination of the divine with the everyday, shown in titles such as *The Resurrection of Lazarus from the Wardrobe,* 1976, **(figure 19)** and *Wardrobe revealing Burning Buddhist Monk,* 1976.[190] What was Clairmont trying to say? Incorporating sacred images into daily settings unites polarities of a spectrum, ranging from sacrosanct to commonplace. Clairmont was possibly mocking the religious aspects or elevating the ordinary aspects or creating a tension between the two.

Clairmont's explanation of his work suggests a highly personal interpretation of his immediate environment. He wrote the following statement for a 1976 exhibition at the Peter Webb Galleries: "These paintings have in common both a positive and an optimisitic view (I believe) of the mundane ... paintings of interiors and related objects of personal significance ... I would like these works to be viewed purely as paintings – paintings that mirror my own involvement with interiors (an obssession now spanning some years)".[191] Clairmont implied a conscious choice in his portrayal of domestic scenes. Although this was a factor, he may have also chosen domestic subject matter by default. He stated in 1980, "I have painting binges, usually at night because I prefer artificial lighting. I like a lot of music because it makes me paint at different speeds...".[192] These conditions are incompatible with working outside the studio, restricting his subject matter to what was readily available – his home. There is also the implication that Clairmont's subject matter is secondary to the

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[189] The oak, telegraph poles and stigmata of *Moslem Virgin* are all allusions to the Crucifixion.
[190] The burning Buddhist monk is probably a reference to 1963 protests in Vietnam, see *Buddha Vietnam.*
[191] Philip Clairmont, list of works and prices for *Clairmont*, Peter Webb Galleries, September 1976.

Figure 16: Philip Clairmont, *Clothesline in a Canterbury Nor'Wester* (1973)
Acrylic and collage on hessian, 1155mm x 902mm
coll: Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui
(Barr, *Philip Clairmont*, p.28)

Figure 17: Philip Clairmont, *Window* (1978)
Acrylic and oil on jute canvas, 1450mm x 920mm
coll: Gibbs, Auckland
(*Art New Zealand, no.10*, p.16)

Figure 18: Philip Clairmont, *Window Still-Life* (1983)
Dye and oil on canvas, 1810mm x 1320mm
coll: Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand
(Index, Hector Library, Te Papa)

Figure 19: Philip Clairmont
The Resurrection of Lazarus from the Wardrobe (1976)
Preparatory sketch, pencil on paper
coll: Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington
(Index, Hector Library, Te Papa)

artist's talent. Any object could become 'Art' if it had passed through the eye of a talented (male) artist: "when seized by the compulsion to paint [Clairmont] turns to the Near-East or most accessible thing, often a piece of furniture, which acts as a catalyst and point of departure. As the painting progresses, the object wanes in importance to take a supporting role to the magic of the paint (and painter)".[193]

It is apparent from the earliest sketches that Clairmont wanted the central feature of *Light source* to be a crucifix. Interestingly, the ceiling beams which form the crucifix do not support the structure of the roof. In comparison, the other ceiling beams to either side of the crucifix appear structural but do not meet the 'crucifix' beams in the centre of the composition. The closer one looks, the more incongruous the 'crucifix' beams become. This may have been a pun: the ceiling beams support the roof as ineffectively as Christianity supports the masses. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary attitudes towards religion and Clairmont's challenging of traditional religious icons (portraying the Virgin Mary holding telegraph poles is a case in point). Although *Light source* has 'tongue-in-cheek' humour, Clairmont wanted to do more than entertain the viewer. When explaining his interest in religion, Clairmont said he was trying to provide "another way of looking at it".[194]

The lightbulb, swinging dramatically in the foreground, is a recurring image in Clairmont's work. It is an image so closely linked with the artist that Nigel Brown used it repeatedly in his series of paintings on Clairmont, created shortly after his friend's death in 1984. Many artists who influenced Clairmont also depicted the lightbulb: Pablo Picasso's *Guernica,* 1937, **(figure 20)** is possibly the most famous example. The light bulb was a familiar motif in the work of both Max Beckmann and Francis Bacon. The central panel of Bacon's *Triptych,* 1971, **(figure 21)** depicts a bare bulb suspended above an open stairwell, reminiscent of the setting for *Light source.*

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[192] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters,* 1980, p.48.
[193] Stephen Ellis, Myth and Magic, *Elva Bett Gallery Newsletter*, August/September 1979.
[194] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters,* 1980, p.46.

Figure 20: Pablo Picasso, *Guernica* (1937)
Oil on canvas, 3500mm x 7770mm
coll: Museo del Prado, Madrid
(Fisch, *Guernica,* pp2-3)

Figure 21: Francis Bacon, *Triptych* (1971)
Centre panel, Oil on canvas, 1950mm x 1450mm
coll: Private collection, United States
(Davies and Yard, *Francis Bacon,* p.66)

Stephen Ellis explains not only Clairmont's use of artificial light, but the distorting effect which this had on his subject matter:

One element that supports [Clairmont's] spirituality is the exclusive use of artificial light. Clairmont puts forward two reasons for it - the fact that the compulsion to paint always seizes him at night (complete with nocturnal associations), and that working with paint in incandescent light gives the colour a garishness and drama when exposed to natural light that would be otherwise impossible to produce. But once again the object, the lightbulb, is only the support; the suggestion and symbol of the bulb ... take over. The swinging incandescent bulb casts a "mutating" light which reveals the objects it illuminates. It is a light which shines through as much as it shines on, and it turns the interior into a landscape - "interior landscape" in as many senses as those words may suggest.[195]

Artificial lighting was another means (along with drug use) of altering Clairmont's perceptions. In his Honours thesis, he wrote, "Artificial light alters the characteristics of objects, casting shadows that emphasise three-dimensional form and at the same time distort it".[196] In 1978 he said, "[artificial light] is very different from natural light. It has more of the dramatic, more of the theatre about it. It calls up your own private universe".[197] Vivid yellow eminates from the bulb, possibly the influence of Goethe's *Farbenlehre* (colour theory): "Goethe... calls yellow the colour which comes nearest to light".[198]

It seems likely that Clairmont used light as a symbol in *Light source*. The dominance of the crucifix suggests Clairmont wanted the lightbulb to symbolise a particular religious theme. In the Bible, John 8:12 declares, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have eternal light".[199] Clairmont's earlier work, *Lampstand,* 1971, **(figure 22)** portrays an anthropomorphic lamp juxtaposed with a Cathedral (presumably the Anglican Cathdral in the centre of Christchurch). This work also pairs references to

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[195] Stephen Ellis, Myth and Magic, *Elva Bett Gallery Newsletter*, August/September 1979.
[196] Philip Clairmont, *An Exercise in Perception*, 1970. No pagination.
[197] Quoted in Ross Fraser, Philip Clairmont Paints a Triptych, in *Art New Zealand, no.11,* Spring 1978, p.41.
[198] Tsukasa Ködera, *Vincent Van Gogh: Christianity versus Nature,* 1990, p.21.
[199] Quoted in ibid, p.35.

Figure 22: Philip Clairmont, *Lampstand* (1971)
Acylic and oil on hessian, 1830mm x 3200mm
coll: Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
(Index, Hector Library, Te Papa)

religion with the motif of the lightbulb, supporting the interpretation of the lightbulb as a religious symbol in *Light source*. Consequently, the lightbulb may be another pun, a reference to the light of God or possibly more general ideas of 'enlightenment'. Perhaps Clairmont was drawing yet again on his art historical knowledge of symbolism. During the Renaissance, particularly in the works of Northern European painters, a shaft of light coming through a window symbolised God's presence; *Giovanni Arnolfini and his Bride,* 1434, **(figure 23)** by Jan Van Eyck, is well-known for such symbolism.

With an understanding of *Light source* and a knowledge of Clairmont's use of domestic subject matter in relation to religious convention, it is now possible to examine how other New Zealand artists have treated similar themes and subject matter. Although there are significant differences between Clairmont's oeuvre and the work of McCahon, Fomison and Brown, there are also important similarities. It is these similarities which beg the question: Why is Clairmont's work usually handled separately from other, closely related trends in New Zealand painting?

Since Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith published *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting* in 1969 (the first such treatise on New Zealand art), Colin McCahon has been the yardstick by which all other New Zealand artists are measured. Elva Bett contends that, "[McCahon] has been chosen as the New Zealand seer, and art history and adulation have made him an almost God-like figure."[200] It is tempting to break free from this convention, but McCahon's spirituality and his early religious works (circa 1947-52[201]) cannot be ignored in relation to Clairmont's own exploration of Christianity .

As recently as December 1999, Philip Matthews, writing for *The Listener,* queried the relevance of Christianity in contemporary society and its future in the new millenium.[202] The article was illustrated with McCahon's *King of the Jews,* 1947, **(figure 24)** and Fomison's *Pieta by Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516),*

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[200] Elva Bett, *New Zealand Art: A Modern Perspective,* 1986, p.10.
[201] These dates are suggested by James Ross (ed.), *New Zealand Modernism - Expressionism and Figurativism*, 1996, p.19.

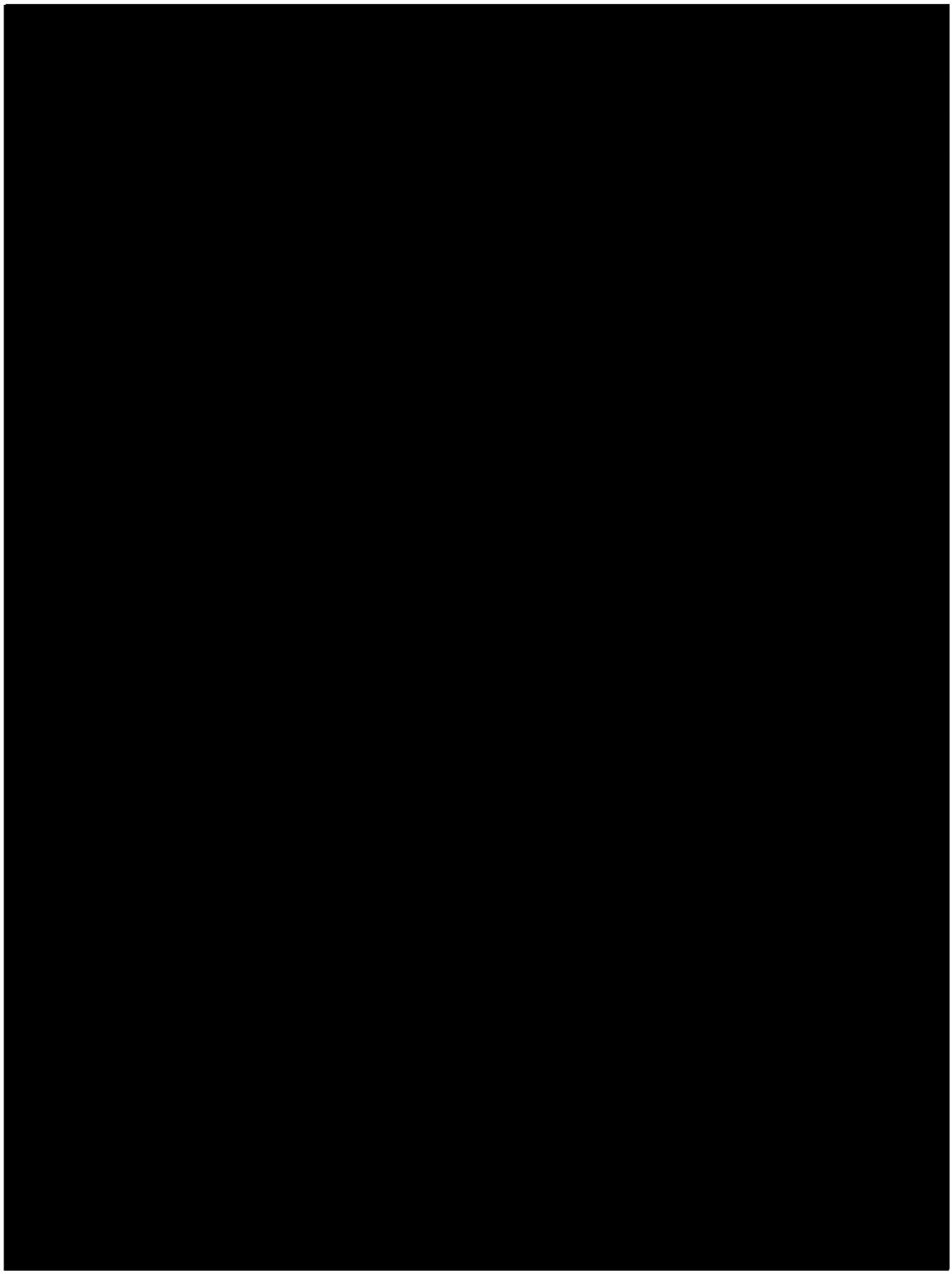

Figure 23: Jan van Eyck, *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride* (1434)
Oil on oak, 820mm x 600mm
coll: National Gallery, London
(Seidel, *Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait,* fig.1)

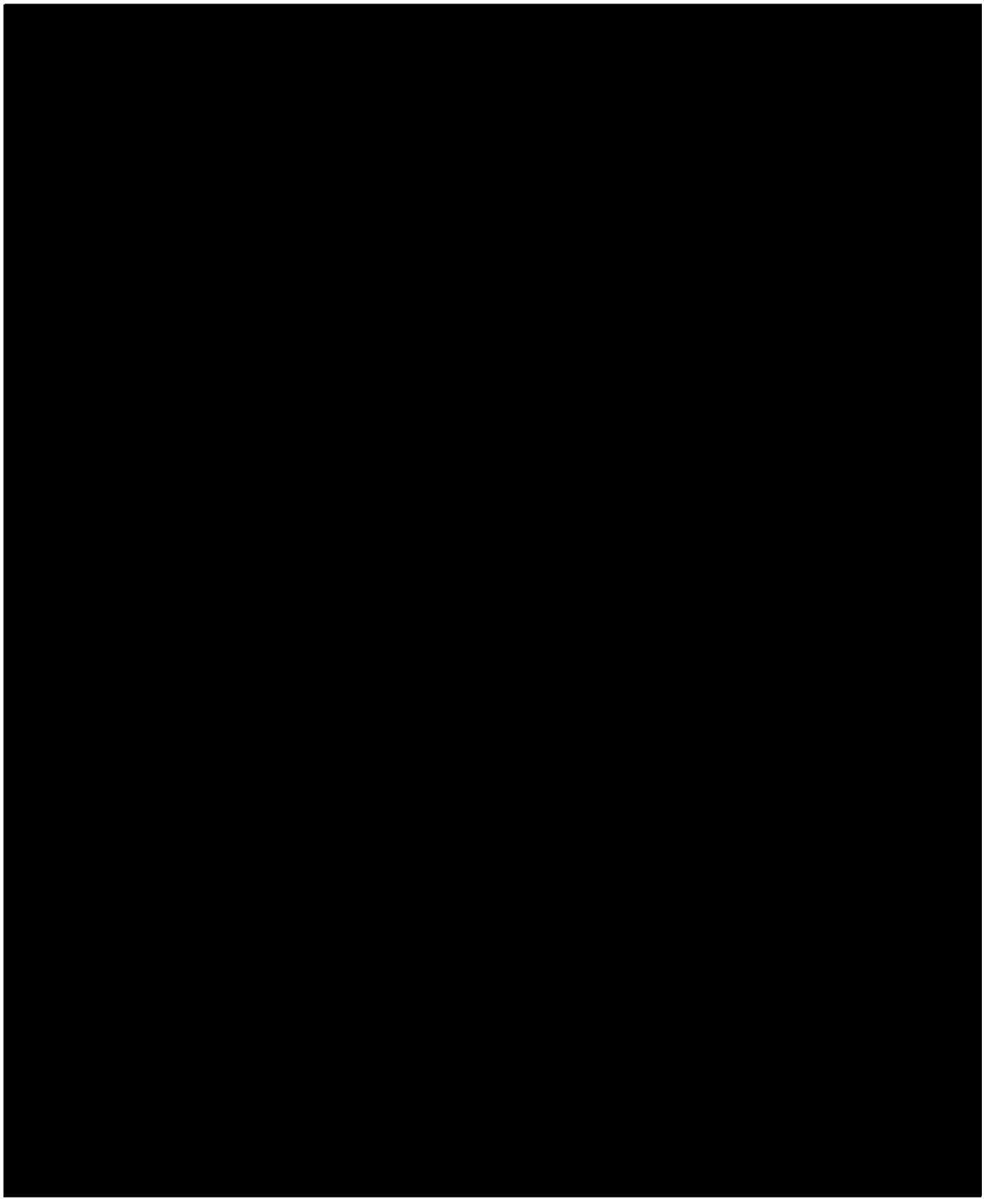

Figure 24: Colin McCahon, *The King of the Jews* (1947)
Oil on board, 640mm x 520mm
coll: Te Papa Tongarewa, Museum of New Zealand, Wellington
(Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon - Artist,* pl.4)

1967. This McCahon work is 53 years old yet it takes precedence over the many religious works that followed in its wake. Fomison is one of the few also recognised for his religious imagery (as demonstrated by Matthews' *Listener* article). A Clairmont work such as *Crucifixion, a triptych,* 1975, **(figure 15)** is suitable to illustrate an article on religion. This is unlikely however if Clairmont's work is interpreted purely within the range of expressionism as understood in New Zealand's art history.

Clairmont exhibited with McCahon at the Govett-Brewster Gallery in 1981. The exhibition, entitled *Stations of the Cross*, corresponded with the 40 days of Lent and "reflect[ed] the response of New Zealand (and other) artists to one of the Western world's most harrowing spiritual images".[203] This exhibition displays rare insight on the part of the curator Paul Johnston. Clairmont's paintings *Crucifixion, a triptych* and *Study for a Contrary Ideological View,* date unknown, were juxtaposed with the religious imagery of Ralph Hotere, Fomison, Brown, Harris, White, Michael Smither, and of course, McCahon. With the exception of a review in *The New Zealand Listener,*[204] this exhibition had little if any impact on the New Zealand art scene. This is unfortunate because it is the only exhibition which included Clairmont on the merits of his religious imagery.

A major difference between Clairmont's and McCahon's religious works is the setting. The majority of Clairmont's religious works are situated in his home. McCahon, on the other hand, placed the Virgin Mary, Christ, and angels in the New Zealand landscape (often the hills of Nelson or Otago[205]). Ross Fraser observed this difference in the two artists in 1976: "As opposed to the large, slow, noble earth movements on which McCahon meditates, Clairmont's creative imagination is pricked into action by a fire in a grate, a wash-basin, a trefoil mirror, a bed, a wardrobe".[206]

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[202] Philip Matthews, The Afterlife, *The New Zealand Listener*, 25th December 1999, pp16-20.
[203] David Hill, Secular Symbols, *The New Zealand Listener,* 11th April 1981, p.36.
[204] Ibid, p.36-37.
[205] James Ross (ed.), *New Zealand Modernism - Expressionism and Figurativism*, 1996, p.19.
[206] Ross Fraser, Philip Clairmont: The Anachronism of Visionary Perception, *Art New Zealand no.1,* August/September 1976, p.18.

An emphasis on the unique New Zealand landscape was part of "the search for a national identity"[207] in the painting of the 1930s, dominating discussions on art well into the 1960s: Keith stated in 1969, "For if anything is singular about this country it is its landscape and its light. These two things - the landscape and the light - have been and still are the two main influences on New Zealand painting".[208] McCahon's work was part of this tradition, placing him alongside artists such as Rita Angus, Christopher Perkins, William Sutton, and Toss Woollaston who all painted distinctly New Zealand geography. Clairmont did not share this direct connection with the land, which has excluded him from such art histories. His religious figures are as monumental as McCahon's but they are either isolated from a particular location (such as *Head of Christ* **(figure 41)** or *Buddha Vietnam)* or they are in a domestic setting which could be part of any home in the Western world (the wardrobes series, for example). To be recognised as an important New Zealand artist, it appears that one had to paint the distinctive marker of national identity.

A second feature which strengthened McCahon's identity as a 'New Zealand artist' is the influence of Maori culture and language. Brown explains: "McCahon interweaves Maori and European elements in an attempt, perhaps, to bridge the two cultures, he does, in fact, strive to go further. McCahon sees the Maori situation as being integrated into a broader spiritual history where all share in the common events of human existence and where light and shade, life and death, weave their eternal pattern upon humanity".[209] McCahon drew on the spirituality of Maori culture in particular; he "painted a number of works which pay homage to the history and beliefs of Maori prophets including Rua Kenana, Te Kooti Rikirangi, and Te Whiti O Rongomai".[210] These concerns are far removed from the pantheism of the Expressionists or the spirituality of the drug culture which inspired Clairmont.

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[207] Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith, title of chapter eight, *Introduction to New Zealand Painting,* 1969, 1975, 1982, p.6.
[208] Hamish Keith, *The Development of Art in New Zealand,* 1969, p.3.
[209] Quoted in Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, *He Taonga Te Reo*, exhibition catalogue, 1995(?) no pagination.
[210] Ibid, no pagination.

The European origins of Clairmont's spirituality distinguished him from other New Zealand artists, more interested in Polynesian cultures. Fomison, for example, was deeply involved with Samoan culture and tradition. Similarly, Emare Karaka "is one of a number of young Maori women who have fused traditional and contemporary elements to express cultural and political concerns. These concerns are the result of the historical events of the 1970s, and the radicalising of Maori politics which accompanied them".[211]

McCahon had closer ties to Christianity than Clairmont. Although McCahon has stated, "I could never call myself a Christian",[212] he did have a detailed knowledge of the Bible: "I got into reading the *New English Bible* and re-reading my favourite passages. I rediscovered good old Lazarus. Now this is one of the most beautiful and puzzling stories in the New Testament - like the Elias story this one takes you through several levels of feeling and being. It hit me, BANG! at where I was: questions and answers, faith so simple and beautiful and doubts still pushing to somewhere else. It really got me down with joy and pain".[213] Clairmont also dealt with the story of Lazarus (*The Resurrection of Lazarus from the Wardrobe,* 1976, **(figure 19)**) but did not have the same knowledge of the Bible. Whilst McCahon's predominant concern was Christianity, Clairmont was interested in the nature of religion. Consequently, Clairmont amalgamated the iconography of several religions into a single image (Buddhism, Islam and Catholicism in *Moslem Virgin*, for example) in a way which McCahon did not. This distinction aligns Clairmont's work more closely with the paintings of Rita Angus. Melvin Day, referring to Angus's *A Goddess of Mercy,* 1946-47, **(figure 25)** asserts that "the symbols, again very personal, are drawn from such sources as orthodox Christian tradition, Buddhist philosophy and other spiritually-oriented philosophies".[214]

Despite the differences in the setting of the religious imagery and the influences of other cultures, Clairmont and McCahon did share some important similarities.

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[211] National Art Gallery Education Kit for *Treasures and Landmarks* exhibition, 1990, no pagination.
[212] Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon - Artist*, 1984, 1993, p.151.
[213] Ibid, p.146.
[214] Melvin Day, The Years 1908-1958, in National Art Gallery, *Rita Angus,* 1982, p.51.

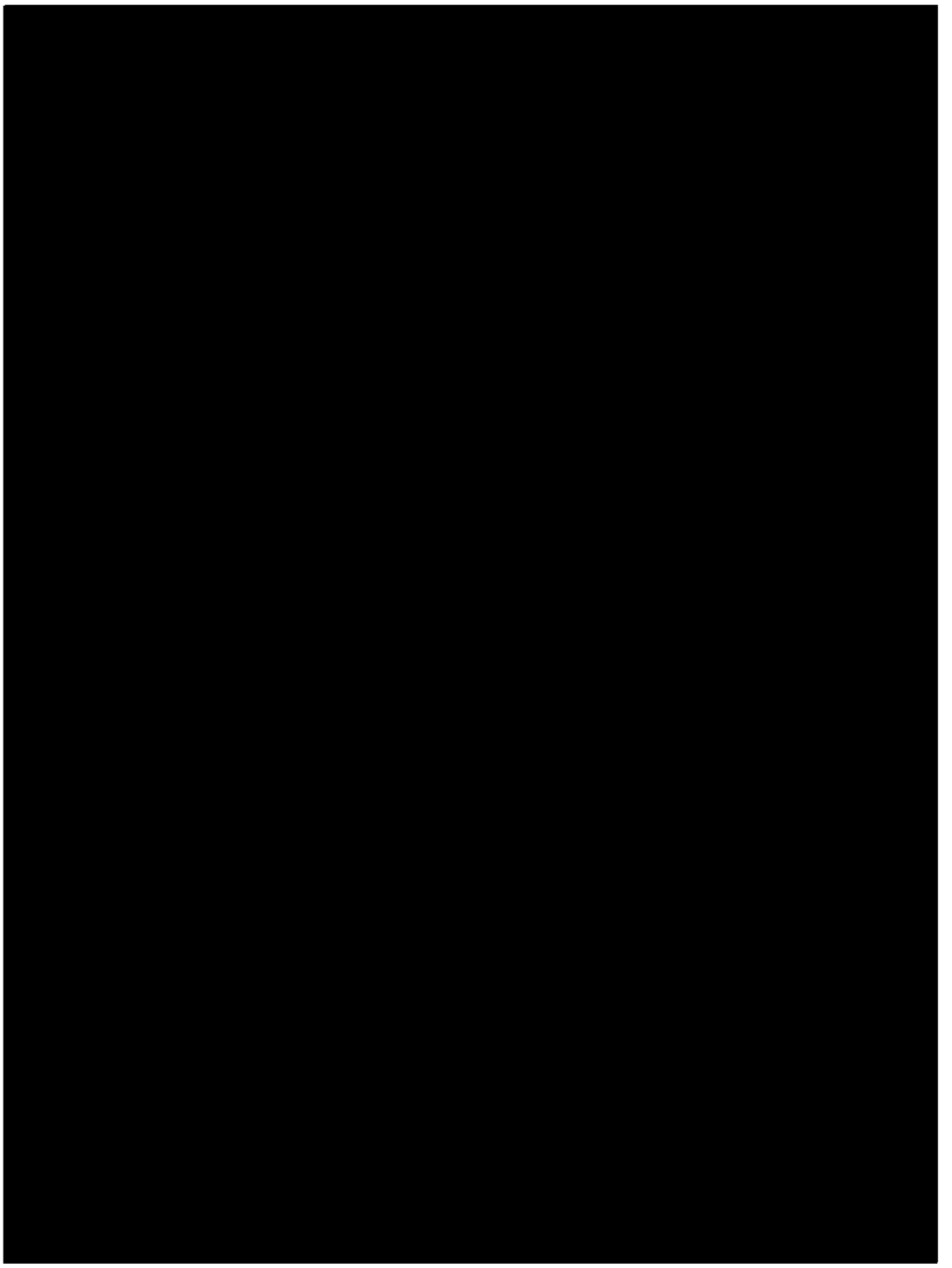

Figure 25: Rita Angus, *A Goddess of Mercy* (1946-1947)
Oil on canvas, 866mm x 615mm
coll: Robert McDougall Gallery
(National Art Gallery, *Rita Angus,* p.116)

Both painted primarily for secular audiences. Clairmont's generation (born c1945-1950) was possibly the first to reject active involvement in the church. However, they did attend Sunday School as children, suggesting McCahon's generation (born c1915-1920) had closer ties to Christian rituals. It is likely that individuals attending art galleries in the late 1940s were more familiar with Bible stories, portrayed by McCahon, than their gallery-attending equivalents in the 1970s who viewed Clairmont's religious work.

Clairmont's audience may not have been as well-versed in religion, but they were more visually literate. The growth of dealer galleries and exposure to mass media improved public knowledge of the visual arts during the intervening decades. Both artists exhibited to audiences who believed religious subject matter was incompatible with contemporary society. Consequently, both artists were perceived as harking back to another period in history. Peter Simpson claimed that McCahon had "a religious vision despite its being out of time and out of place in a materialistic secular society".[215] T.J. McNamara said of Clairmont's paintings: "this expressionist method of attack is out of fashion nowadays".[216] Although critics responded to expressionism, not religion, in Clairmont's work, the observation remained the same: neither expressionism nor religion were considered relevant to New Zealand society in the 1960s and 1970s.

Eastern spirituality was an interest shared by both Clairmont and McCahon. Clairmont's exploration of Buddhism, influenced in part by political issues arising from the Vietnam War, has already been discussed in chapter one. McCahon's 1965 *Waterfall* series included a Zen koan: "As there is a constant flow of light we are born into the pure land".[217] The koan is "a baffling problem which appears to be nonsensical but through which one can achieve satori".[218] Satori is "a sudden realisation of truth, bringing a sense of release".[219] As with

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[215] Quoted in Gregory O'Brien, *Nigel Brown*, 1991, p.13.
[216] T.J. McNamara, Intense Life Caught in Paintings, *The New Zealand Herald*, 20th August 1987.
[217] Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*, 1969, 1975, 1982, 1988, p.17.
[218] Kenneth Leech, *Youthquake*, 1973, p.67.
[219] Ibid, p.67.

Christianity, McCahon's interest in Eastern religions possibly went deeper that that of Clairmont's. McCahon also felt an affinity between Egyptian religion and the New Zealand landscape: "... I first became aware of my own particular god, perhaps an Egyptian god, but standing far from the sun of Egypt in the Otago cold... I saw something logical, orderly and beautiful belonging to the land and not yet to its people. Not yet understood or communicated, not even really invented yet".[220] McCahon incorporated detailed aspects of religion into his work in a manner which suggests a consistency with his own beliefs. In comparison, Clairmont used religion to explore a variety of broader issues: war, drug use, alternative realities, and symbolism.

Both Clairmont and McCahon[221] chose similar scenes from the New Testament. James Ross itemises the main themes in McCahon's early religious work as: "the Annunciation, the Madonna and Child, the Crucifixion, the Deposition, and the Entombment."[222] The first three were handled by Clairmont, but not the latter two. Curiously, Clairmont portrayed Christ's story only until the Crucifixion scene. Once the divine had left Jesus' body, Clairmont apparently lost interest in the remaining human form. Clairmont may have neglected the Deposition and Entombment because they were stories without easily recognisable symbolism. The Annunciation, Madonna and Child, and Crucifixion have symbolic potential and offer interpretation on multiple levels. They can therefore appear subtly in otherwise secular scenes. The Deposition and Entombment are less flexible and require overt representation, incompatible with Clairmont's other domestic scenes.

Gordon Brown interpreted McCahon's *Crucifixion with Lamp,* 1947, **(figure 26)** as follows: "... the lamp emits a double meaning as a symbol of God's mysterious wisdom to the faithful, the lamp that illuminates the path in a time of darkness, and as signifying the mission of Christ, the light that shines as an example to the whole world."[223] This description could also summarise Clairmont's *Light source.* It appears that lamps can symbolise God's wisdom

[220] Quoted in Hamish Keith, *The Development of Art in New Zealand,* 1969, p.20.
[221] Referring only to McCahon's early period of religious works: 1946-1952.
[222] James Ross (ed.), *New Zealand Modernism - Expressionism and Figurativism*, 1996, p.19.

Figure 26: Colin McCahon, *Crucifixion, with Lamp* (1947)
Oil on board, 770mm x 910mm
coll: Hocken Library, Dunedin
(Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon - Artist,* pl.6)

and Christ's mission, but lightbulbs cannot. Lamps, such as the ones McCahon portrayed, suggest another point in time, distant from the advances of technology and discoveries such as electricity; lamps belong to a period in history when religion was an integral part of life. In comparison, a lightbulb lacks mystery; it is commonplace and everyday and, as a result, does not readily suggest religious meaning. Clairmont may have used lightbulbs as a homage to McCahon's lamps. Clairmont also referred to McCahon's work in *Our Lady of the Flowers* (see chapter five: the lilies are probably a reference to McCahon's *Hail Mary,* 1948 **(figure 32)**). Clairmont was possibly offering an updated version of McCahon's symbolism in *Light source.* By adding a technological aspect, he was also re-examining one of his favourite themes: the interplay between religious belief and scientific empiricism (discussed in chapter two).

Tony Fomison and Nigel Brown, two of Clairmont's contemporaries, also drew on the Bible for subject matter. Both Fomison and Brown created images that were recognisable for a religious quality without being religious art. Referring to Fomison's work *Study of a Hand*, 1970, **(figure 27)** Lara Strongman argues that it is "a devotional painting, an image for spiritual contemplation and study".[224] Similarly, a lengthy passage in the *Anxious Images* exhibition catalogue (an exhibition which also included the works of Clairmont) also examines the religious nature of Fomison's work:

The New Testament title of the painting [*Agony in the Garden,* 1981-1982] makes the implication of the work clear; but the painting itself gives us an indication of Fomison's awareness of the spiritual needs of humanity, often difficult to articulate or to understand. His knowledge of other cultures' spirituality, surviving better than that of Western society, has enlarged his own long-standing interest in religious thought: 'I wouldn't reject any attempt at religion ... it wasn't until long after I stopped going to church that I realised that Christianity was not just a building on the corner called church, and that a Maori religion wasn't just a God-stick in a missionary's collection.

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[223] Gordon Brown, *Colin McCahon - Artist*, 1984, 1993, p.42.
[224] Lara Strongman, *Tony Fomison: An Artist's Life,* 1991, p.82.

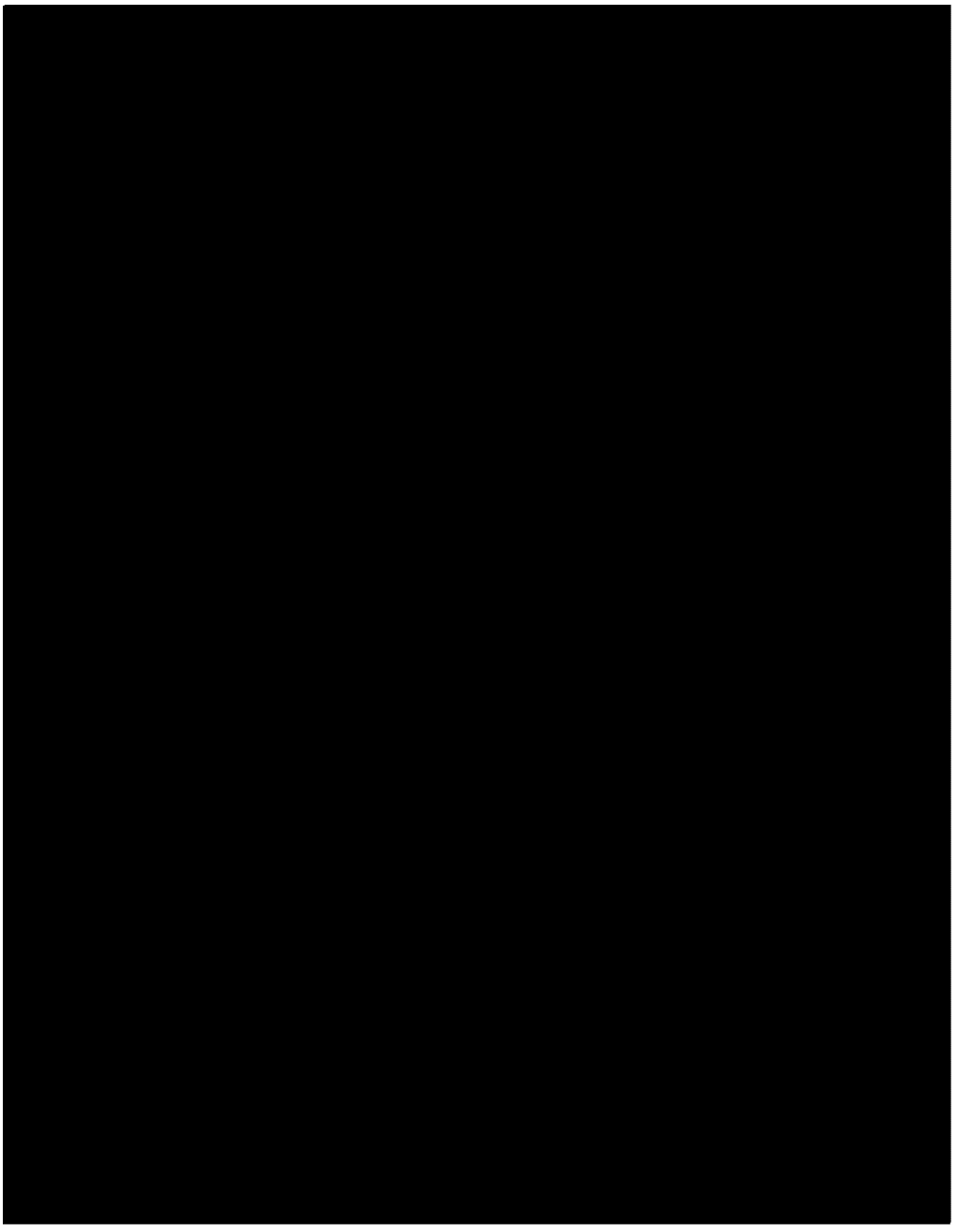

Figure 27: Tony Fomison, *Study of a Hand* (1970)
Oil on hessian on board, 845mm x 580mm
coll: Auckland City Art Gallery
(Johnston, *Anxious Images,* p.34)

They are both reminders that you've got to evolve; walk through a journey called your life. That's what my paintings are all about.[225]

Nigel Brown's work is also discussed relative to its religious qualities. Gregory O'Brien believes, "Brown's work often conveys a sense of the 'sacred' but rarely the specifically 'religious'".[226] He also quotes Brown as saying, "I'm not a Christian myself, although I still believe in the religious aspect of life. It's been important and I do believe that my predominant inheritance is Christian, so it's part of things ... in my paintings, at the same time as I'm trying to get away from it, I like to have it there...".[227] The contrary aspects of Brown's interest in, and rejection of, Christianity are present in both Clairmont's and McCahon's work as well. However, it is only in the work of Clairmont that the religious element is not discussed by critics.

Brown's imagery shares an interesting parallel with Clairmont's work in a way which McCahon's and Fomison's do not. Brown met Clairmont in 1980 and they became friends. Brown spent time with Clairmont at Mangamahu during late 1981, where he recalls "feeling totally submerged by Phil's profusion".[228] Like Clairmont, Brown also used the Cross implicitly in his work (*Three Ferns,* 1980, **(figure 28)** for example, alludes to the Crucifixion). Unlike Clairmont, however, he located the Cross implicitly in the landscape, not the domestic interior: "Brown assimilated what [Peter] Simpson described as McCahon's... 'shared preoccupation with the land, the people, and in particular the contrast between the natural and social order'".[229] Perhaps for this reason Brown's implicit use of religious symbolism is identified. By portraying the unique geography of the landscape he was working within the defined criteria of "New Zealand painting". Therefore, implicit religious content is more easily identified in Brown's work than in Clairmont's relatively obscure domestic settings (of which *Light source* is a prime example).

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[225] Alexa Johnston, *Anxious Images: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art,* 1984, p.30.
[226] Gregory O'Brien, *Nigel Brown,* 1991, p.30.
[227] Ibid, p.44.
[228] Nigel Brown, Personal correspondence to the author, 7th July 1999.
[229] Gregory O'Brien, *Nigel Brown,* 1991, p.13.

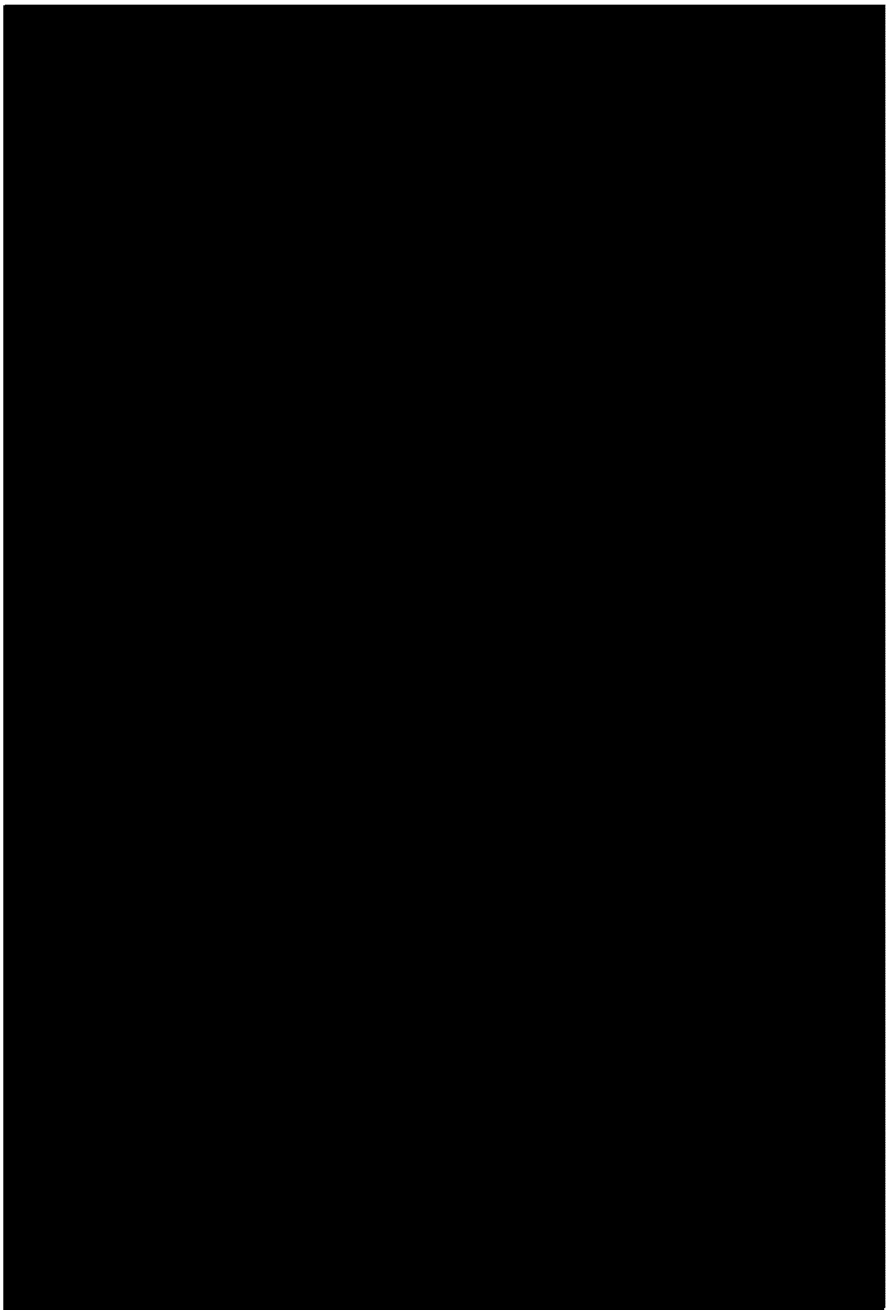

Figure 28: Nigel Brown, *Three Ferns* (1980)
Acrylic on paper, 460mm x 310mm
coll: the artist
(O'Brien, *Nigel Brown,* p.30)

This argument is supported by comparing the interpretations of Rita Angus's and Lois White's religious imagery. Angus's goddess portraits of the late 1940s and early 1950s feature the New Zealand landscape and, particularly in the case of *Rutu,* 1951, **(figure 29)** have a strong Pacific flavour. Ronald Brownson argues that in these works, "the figure is settled in a contemplative pose which signifies a physiognomical equivalent to bliss. Although Eastern and Western traditions had used this connotative model as a sign of spiritual experience for centuries, this pictorial mysticism speaks for something fresh in New Zealand painting".[230] In comparison, White's religious imagery (see *Annunciation,* c.1952, **(figure 30)** for example) is not situated within a specifically New Zealand environment: "The highly mannered and decorative treatment of her figure compositions has been difficult to place in the predominantly landscape-oriented context of New Zealand painting".[231] Consequently, "White's religious paintings were described as 'carefully modulated, rather decorative compositions' in comparision to the 'immediacy and sense of urgency in Colin McCahon's religious themes'".[232] Both White and Clairmont were placed at a disadvantage by not portraying the land or the indigenous culture.

Clairmont gained inspiration from religious symbolism and iconography. These influences appeared subtly in scenes of domesticity but have often been overlooked. *Light source* obtains greater significance when viewed in relation to Clairmont's religious interests. Once Clairmont's religious language is understood, discussions can widen to consider other New Zealand artists and their treatment of similar subject matter. Both Clairmont and McCahon were drawn to religion, which they reinterpreted within the secular climate of New Zealand society. Clairmont diverted from trends towards the land and indigenous people by focusing on his home and challenging the sacrosanct quality of devotional icons (In *Light source,* the ceiling beams form a crucifix and a lightbulb symbolises the light of God's wisdom - both very unconventional

[230] Ronald Brownson, Symbolism and the Generation of Meaning in Rita Angus's Painting, in National Art Gallery, *Rita Angus,* 1982, p.83.
[231] Quoting Anne Kirker, in Nicola Green, *By the Waters of Babylon: The Art of A Lois White,* 1993, p.12.
[232] Ibid, p.12. Green is quoting Gordon Brown.

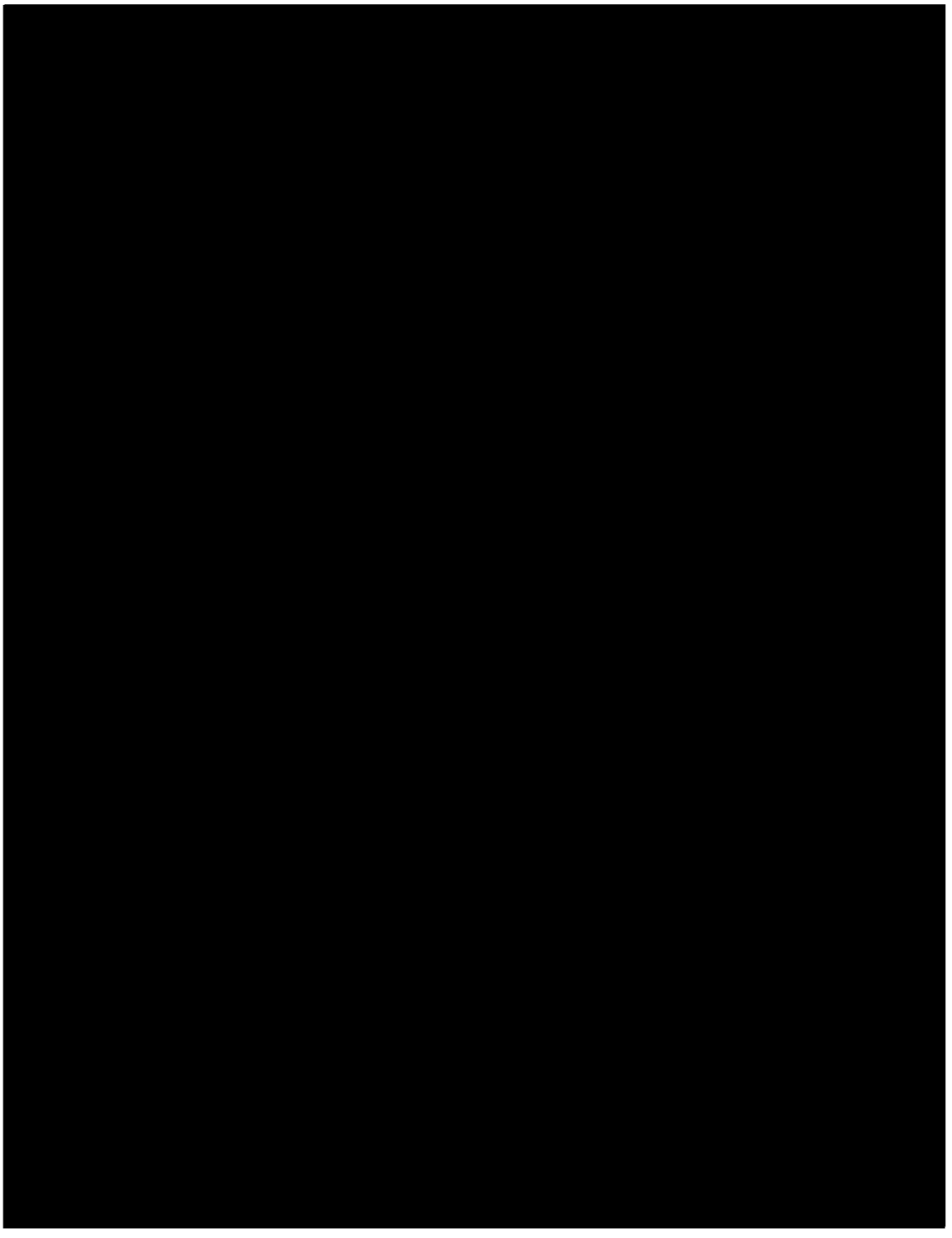

Figure 29: Rita Angus, *Rutu* (1951)
Oil on canvas, 712mm x 552mm
coll: Rita Angus Loan Collection
(National Art Gallery, *Rita Angus*, p.117)

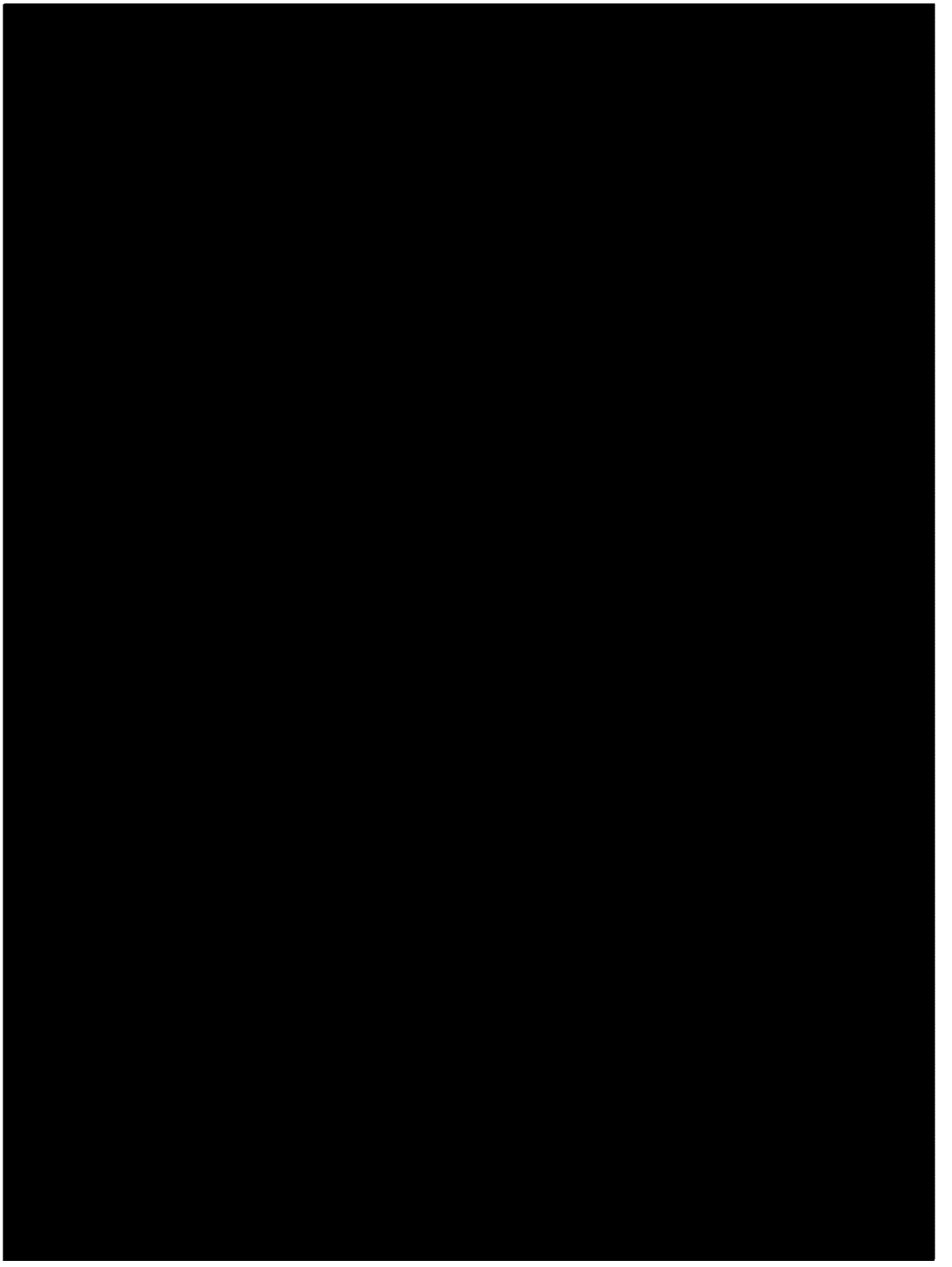

Figure 30: A. Lois White, *Annunciation* (c.1952)
Oil on board, 855mm x 587mm
coll: Auckland City Art Gallery
(Green, *By the Waters...*, p.103)

depictions). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Clairmont's contemporaries Tony Fomison and Nigel Brown also explored religious themes but in a manner comprehensible within the New Zealand art historical framework. The domestic content and expressionist style of Clairmont's work has limited the appreciation of its religious and symbolic qualities.

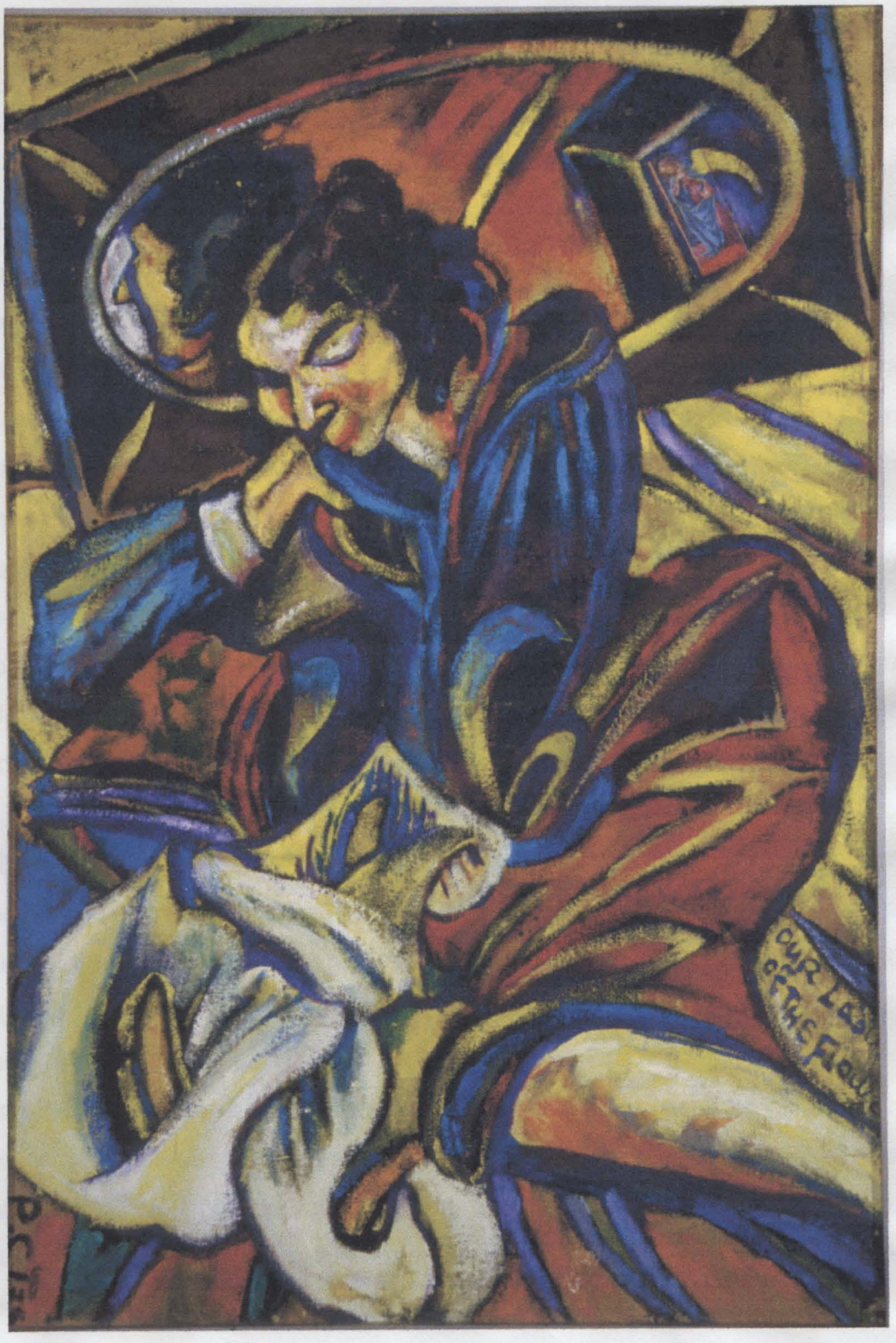

Figure 31: Philip Clairmont, *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1979)
Acrylic and oil on jute canvas, 360mm x 910mm
coll: Rachel Power, Auckland
(University of Canterbury Fine Arts Slide Collection)

Chapter Five: Our Lady of the Flowers (1979)

Clairmont separated from his wife Viki in 1977 and moved into central Wellington. Later that year he met Rachel Power on a trip to Auckland, prompting him to move north in 1978. In 1979 they bought a house together, a former convent and Rajnessh spiritual centre.[233] *Our Lady of the Flowers* **(figure 31)** was painted in 1979, practically overnight,[234] and marks an important shift in Clairmont's portrayal of both himself and his family. Increasingly, Clairmont used religious imagery to identify personal themes: images of Christ and the Virgin Mary were no longer the icons they had been in works such as *Crucifixion, a triptych* **(figure 15)** and *Moslem Virgin*; their identities became entwined with those of Clairmont, Rachel and their son Orlando. Clairmont's appropriation of religious symbolism is of particular relevance to *Our Lady*. A related work, *The Holy Family,* 1980, **(figure 34)** is also examined in light of Clairmont's interest in religion. The durable and profound impact of Francis Bacon's imagery and philosophies on Clairmont, visible in *Holy Family*, conclude this chapter.

Clairmont changed his drug use during this period. His painting was informed principally by alcohol instead of hallucinogenics. Clairmont was an alcoholic, an infliction he attempted to overcome. In 1978, he went on a detoxification programme for drugs and alcohol at Carrington Hospital. The following year he spent three months at Hanmer Springs "drying out".[235] On his return to Auckland, a friend and fellow artist was waiting to greet him with alcohol, leading to an almost immediate relapse into a lifestyle of excess and self-destruction.[236] Despite obvious attempts to overcome his problems with drugs and alcohol, his way of life, which had been established whilst he was a student at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Art, ensured a continuation of the *enfant terrible* persona.

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[233] Adam Gifford, The Man and Myth *Sunday Star Times,* 9th August, 1984.
[234] Michael Morrissey, The Magic of Clairmont, *The New Zealand Herald*, 20th August 1987.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Viki Clairmont, personal communication to author, 9th November 1999.

The shift from hallucinogenics and opiates to alcohol is an important one. Clairmont is renowned for his use of hard drugs yet the final six years of his life were spent working under the influence of alcohol. The visual effects induced by psychedelic drugs shaped Clairmont's work as a student, a stimulus which continued well into the 1970s. His interest in these drugs, however, was partly a product of the time. The hippy culture of the late 1960s embraced experimentation and rebellion – drug use was the perfect means of challenging the establishment and creating a new form of community and spirituality. By the late 1970s, hippy culture was outdated and the dangers of drug use were no longer ignored. Clairmont was also growing older. He turned 30 in 1979, possibly prompting a re-examination of his life and questioning what had become a well-entrenched identity as an artist. Neroli Fairhall, a friend and former flatmate from Clairmont's student days, noticed a marked change in him during a trip to Auckland: "It was good to see him but it was a different Phil in a way, he seemed different. He seemed a bit anxious, not as relaxed as he had been".[237]

The differences between drug use and alcohol had an impact on Clairmont's painting. The major change is the side-effects. Hallucinogenic drugs are visual. They distort perceptions of the environment, intensifying light and colour, and provoke feelings of sacredness and spirituality. Alcohol does not have this effect. If anything, one's 'vision' (both literally and spiritually) becomes more clouded, rather than clearer. Alcohol use also lacks the ceremony which accompanies drug consumption. The extensive literature on hallucinogenics as religious activity (discussed at length in chapter one), is absent from literature on alcohol. It is interesting that a stronger commitment by Clairmont to the use of religious imagery in his work (of which *Our Lady* is a fitting example) should be accompanied by stimulants with a weaker parallel to religious activity.

Alcohol may not produce visual hallucinations, but it does have a long history with the arts. Some poets and writers are infamous for heavy drinking; Dylan

[237] Neroli Fairhall, interview with author, 7th September 1999.

Thomas, F Scott Fitzgerald and Edgar Allan Poe are well-known examples. Not coincidentally, each of the individuals mentioned above was male. The stereotypical Romantic, womanising, alcoholic, loner, genius artiste is well established. Although women are not immune to alcoholism,[238] it is a hallmark of male culture. Jock Phillips contends that there is a "powerful linkage between drinking beer and masculinity" in New Zealand.[239] Artists such as Jackson Pollock, Francis Bacon and Amedeo Modigliani were alcoholics, an addiction which may have damaged their health but, if anything, confirmed their public identity as creative artists. Gopas and Fomison, both alcoholics, conformed to this stereotype of the creative artist, undoubtedly having an impact on Clairmont's drug use. Edmonds explains both the extent of Gopas's addiction and its effect on his relationship with his students:

> One of his students remembers him buying nasal sprays by the basket load. He would pull them apart and pour vodka through the cotton wool they contained in order to extract the amphetamine within. Bill Sutton recalled that he drank copious amounts of sherry and vodka. Given that he believed nothing should stand in the way of the making of art, the use of alcohol and speed should probably be seen as aids in creation. In this sense, as in others, Gopas remained contemporary with his pupils, and his teaching became a form of collaboration, a mutual exploration of possibilities.[240]

The heavy drinking of the aforementioned artists may have been the product of personal difficulties, but it was supported by an accepted image of the artist and a culture which condoned, even expected, such behaviour. Clairmont's alcoholism placed him within this established context. The struggle between Clairmont's health and public expectations may have also led him to question his role as an artist and inspired the use of religion to examine issues of identity.

The absense of hallucinogenic drugs is telling in *Our Lady*. Stephen Ellis observed that in Clairmont's Auckland works: "The object is more discernible,

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[238] Statistics released five years before *Our Lady* was painted suggest that the ratio of male to female alcoholics in England was 4:1. See Derek Rutherford, *Alcohol,* 1974, p.33. In light of Phillips' observations of New Zealand culture, the New Zealand ratio was possibly even higher.
[239] Jock Phillips, *A Man's Country*, 1987, p.269.

the colour is crisper and cleaner and the whole is much tidier".[241] The watching eyes, slashing lines, psychedelic colour and distorted, blurred form of his earlier works is absent. Instead, shapes are well defined and colour is specific to particular forms (compare this with the surface patterns and nebulous quality of *Buddha Vietnam*). Clairmont made similar observations himself in 1978: "In my paintings of the past I have perhaps had a tendency to overwork the painting, to garnish it with too much extraneous stuff. Now I seem to be sorting out the more essential things, making the same statement in a simpler way, with broader areas of colour. And where there *is* detail it is now more meaningful in relation to the spaces".[242]

Our Lady is a work filled with symbolism. The painting shows three representations of the Virgin Mary: a reproduction of a Renaissance image in the background; a portrait of Rachel in the centre of the composition; and white lilies, recognised as the flower of the Virgin, in the foreground. Judging by the Virgin's pose in the Renaissance image (cropped from a larger composition), the painting was originally an Annunciation scene. During the Renaissance, body language and gesture conveyed meaning in a painting. In an Annunciation scene, the Virgin was portrayed in one of five formalised poses, expressing various reactions to her fate (fright, denial, acceptance, etc).

Rachel's pose echoes the gesture of the Renaissance Virgin, creating a link between the two. Clairmont has also repeated the red and blue of the Virgin's robes in Rachel's clothing. Traditionally, red symbolised the blood of Christ and love; blue symbolised Heaven as well as eternity and immensity.[243] The juxtaposition of these colours represented "authority and love", believed to be the colour of the clothing of God.[244] Kandinsky responded to this colour combination in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. He wrote: "It is interesting to note that this placing together of red and blue was so beloved by the primitive both in Germany and Italy, that is has survived until today, principally in popular

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[240] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.47.
[241] Stephen Ellis, Myth and Magic, *Elva Bett Newsletter,* August/September 1979.
[242] Quoted in Ross Fraser, Philip Clairmont Paints a Triptych, *Art New Zealand, no.11,* Spring 1978, p.41.
[243] Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery,* 1974, pp.383 & 55.

religious carving".[245] Jung, who was also interested in colour theories, proposed red as the opposite of blue.[246]

Prominently placed in the foreground is the third image of the Virgin, although now in a purely symbolic form: the lily. It is defined as a "symbol of purity, and has become the flower of the Virgin...".[247] Clairmont frequently paired flowers with religious imagery: *Crucifixion with Flowers,* 1976, and *Vase of Chrysanthemums (with Gauguin's Yellow Christ),* 1975, for example. The use of three lilies is another Renaissance convention. They symbolise triple purity: before, during and after the birth.[248] The lilies are placed prominently in the foreground, reminiscent of Colin McCahon's *Hail Mary,* 1948, **(figure 32)** which is also an Annunciation scene.

Mirrors have already been discussed as a window into other realities. In *Our Lady* however, the mirror, located between Rachel and the Renaissance image, serves a different function by incorporating ideas about the nature of symbolism. The Renaissance image appears only as a reflection. For the viewer, it exists inside the mirror. In contrast, Rachel sits in front of the mirror. She is present as both reality and reflection. The mirror underscores the layers of symbolism in the work. It creates a barrier between the present and local of Clairmont's life and environment and the past and alien world of fifteenth-century Italy (or the even more distant world of ancient Palestine). Clairmont used the mirror to condense time and space, revealing the parallels and similarities between his surroundings and the history of both art and religion. The mirror reveals Rachel's role as the Virgin Mary. The frame appears as a halo whilst the reflection shows her two roles. Usually, symbols present both an appearance and a meaning simultaneously; the mirror splits the dual function, placing the two side by side.

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[244] Ibid, p.55.
[245] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* 1912, 1947, 1955, p.66.
[246] Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery,* 1974, p.55.
[247] George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, 1954, 1955, p.41.
[248] Jeannine Baticle, *Zurbaran*, 1987, p.284.

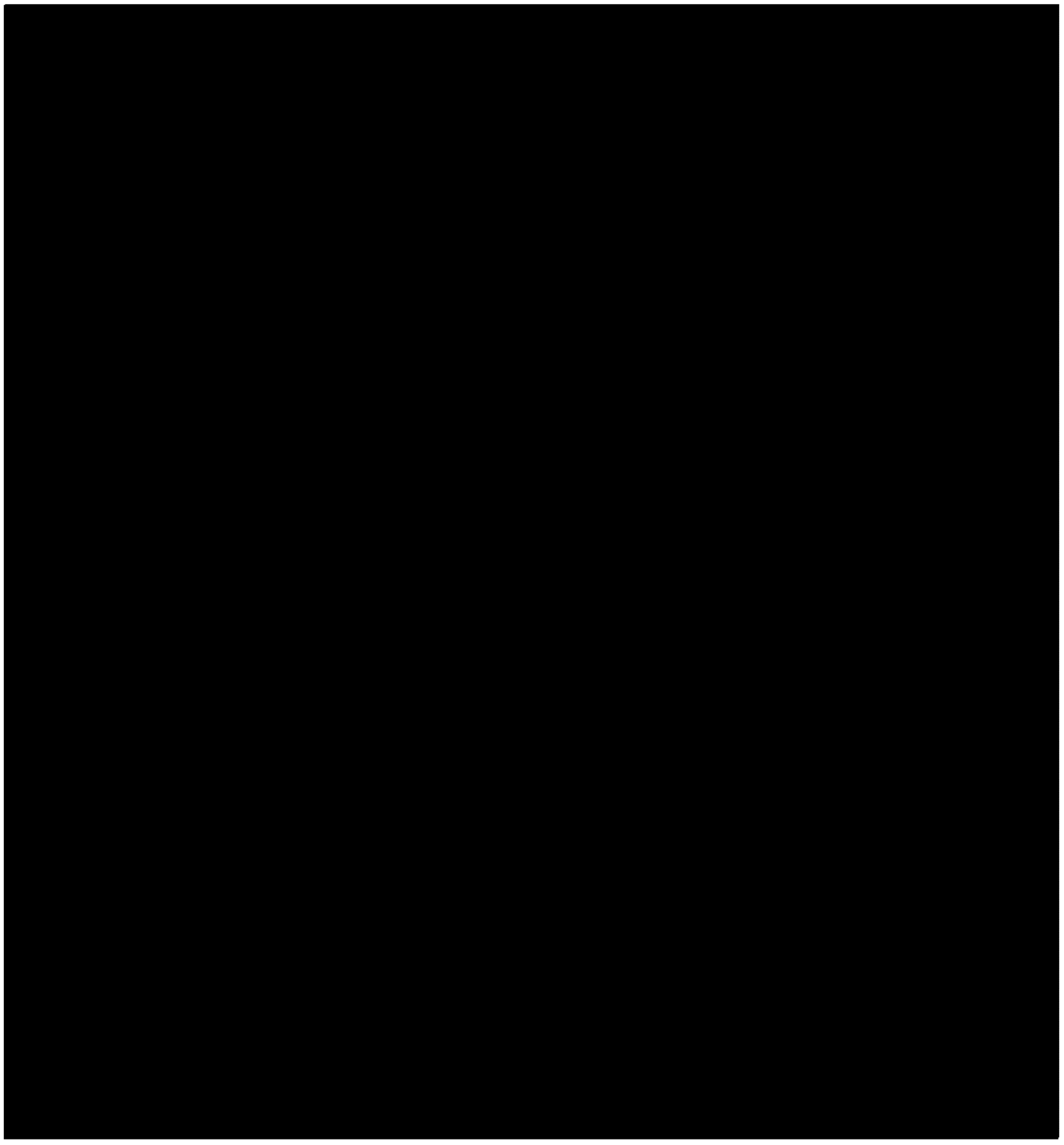

Figure 32: Colin McCahon, *Hail Mary* (1948)
Oil on canvas, 930mm x 890mm
coll: the Artist
(*Art New Zealand no.8,* p.32)

The title of *Our Lady* quotes a novel Clairmont owned in the 1960s. The author, Jean Genet, used mirrors as an extension of space rather than a reflection. Richard Coe explains that for Genet, the sky (or heaven) which is reflected in a puddle of water is an extension of that space underground. As a result, a descent into the lowly or seedier aspects of life is a means of reaching redemption or heaven.[249] Similarly, Genet does not conceive of Heaven above and Hell below. Because Heaven is both above and below, Hell is the daily existence between the two.[250] Genet has been accused of blasphemy but this probably appealed to Clairmont due to his interest in the questioning and challenging of religious imagery.

Using a mirror to extend space is also relevant to Clairmont's imagery. Martin Edmond has recognised Clairmont's mother, Thelma, reflected in the mirror of *Our Lady*.[251] This explains the discrepancy between Rachel and her reflected image, recalling the famous discrepancy in Edouard Manet's *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère,* 1881-82 **(figure 33)**. By drawing a parallel between his mother and his partner in the role of the Virgin, Clairmont presented himself in a multitude of roles: a son to Thelma and, therefore, Christ; a partner to Rachel and, by extension, Joseph or possibly the Holy Spirit; and a father to Orlando and, by extension, God. It may be considered blasphemous that Clairmont drew parallels between himself and the Holy Trinity but Clairmont was more concerned with providing "another way of looking at [religion]".[252] Clairmont used mirrors to go further into a scene and portray worlds beyond everyday perception.

References to the Annunciation (ie: lilies and the Renaissance reproduction of the gesticulating Virgin) confirm Rachel's pregnancy at this time.[253] Text from Genet's book *Our Lady of the Flowers* also makes reference to the Annuciation: "...all eyes could read, graven in the aura of Our Lady of the Flowers, the

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[249] Richard Coe, *The Vision of Jean Genet,* 1968, p.31.
[250] Ibid, p.32.
[251] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont*, 1999, p.62.
[252] Philip Clairmont, quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters,* 1980, p.48.
[253] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont*, 1999, p.163.

Figure 33: Edouard Manet, *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881-82)
Oil on canvas, 960mm x 1300mm
coll: Courthauld Institute Galleries, London
(Richardson, *Manet,* pl.45)

following words: 'I am the Immaculate Conception'".[254] It may have been the purpose of the painting to celebrate the impending arrival of Clairmont's second child. If this is the case, it is interesting that he would chose religious symbols and language to mark this event when he was not a practising Christian. It is, however, typical of Clairmont to draw on religion in order to heighten the emotion of his works and suggest a super-human force. Edmond, for example, believes that Orlando's appearance in *Birth Triptych,* 1979, "[suggests] that he has arrived from some mysterious elsewhere into human time...".[255]

Clairmont continued to paint Rachel and Orlando in this mode over the following couple of years. *Birth Triptych* is a self-explanatory title. The triptych format, reminiscent of altarpieces, suggests adulation and devotion. The religious connotations in *Our Lady* continue in *Birth Triptych;* it is Clairmont's proclamation of his son's birth on a grand scale. The following year Clairmont painted *The Holy Family,* 1980, **(figure 34)**. Rachel is shown holding Orlando above her, haloed in light. Clairmont is portrayed leaning upside down against Rachel's back, his arms outstretched along the ground. Rachel and Orlando are obviously the Virgin and Child. Clairmont's role is ambiguous. Traditionally, he would be Joseph, husband to Mary, but his involvement (particularly his pose) suggests otherwise. Possibly he portrayed himself as Saint Peter, who was crucified upside down. He was probably familiar with this image from Baroque paintings of Saint Peter's crucifixion by the Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbaran (1598-1664) or the Italian Michelangelo da Caravaggio (1571-1610). His interest in Catholicism may have also influenced his depiction: Saint Peter was the first Pope and original head of the Christian church.

The trinity of this 'Holy Family' is reinforced by the triangular composition of the three figures (Rachel's head forms the pinnacle, her right foot and Clairmont's left hand form the base of the triangle). However, Clairmont eludes to a fourth figure, his daughter Melissa from his marriage to Viki. Although she is not physically present, her name is written, upside down and reversed, in a speech

[254] Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers,* 1964, p.280.

Figure 34: Philip Clairmont, *The Holy Family* (1980)
Mixed media on paper, 1065mm x 740mm
coll: Paris Family, Wellington
(Bett: *New Zealand Art...*, p.97)

bubble which emerges from Rachel's mouth. Melissa's inclusion breaks from the religious theme which dominates the rest of the composition but it does reflect more pressing concerns which Clairmont had at this time. Edmond explains: "[Clairmont] wrote to Viki Clairmont who had returned from overseas, telling her that he now had two children and had bought a house where he hoped the four of them - Rachel, Melissa, Orlando and himself - could all grow in love and peace. The letter was never sent, nor was the wish ever fulfilled".[256] A cross (formed by Clairmont's feet, left hand, and slashing lines in the bottom left hand corner) is visible beneath the triangular composition, converting the religious trinity into a secular quartet.

Rachel's face in *Holy Family* is stylistically indebted to Francis Bacon. Unlike Bacon, Clairmont rarely painted the human form. Consequently, Bacon's influence on Clairmont is, by and large, indirect because the distinguishing features of his style do not appear in Clairmont's domestic subject matter. In fact, Bacon claimed, "I want to isolate the image and take it away from the interior and the home",[257] an approach in direct opposition to Clairmont's scenes of domesticity. When Clairmont did paint the human form, Bacon's influence becomes clearer. Clairmont mentioned this influence explicitly in an *Art New Zealand* interview in 1978: "It may be that one of my ambitions as a painter is eventually to come to terms with the figure - to do something significant with it. I don't think any modern painter - apart from Francis Bacon maybe - has managed to do this... Bacon has managed to say something new about the human condition in his figures".[258] It was probably these concerns (ie: doing "something significant" with the figure, saying "something new about the human condition") which Clairmont was grappling with when he painted both *Our Lady* and *Holy Family.*

Bacon's influence is not apparent in the bodies Clairmont painted; instead, it is in the faces. Jim Barr contends that the figure was a weakness in Clairmont's

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[255] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.163.
[256] Ibid, p.166.
[257] Quoted in Hugh Davies and Sally Yard, *Francis Bacon,* 1986, p.77.
[258] Quoted in Ross Fraser, Philip Clairmont Paints a Triptych, *Art New Zealand, no.11,* Spring 1978, p.41.

work,[259] which may explain the artist's hesitancy in tackling the human form which Bacon portrayed with such complexity and sophistication. Thus, Rachel's body in *Holy Family* does not bear a resemblance to Bacon's work but her face does, apparent in the portrait *Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne (on light ground),* 1965 **(figure 35)**. Each work portrays a woman in profile, her features are abstracted by bold strokes of colour.

Whilst at Nelson College in 1966, Clairmont wrote an 'Art Thesis' in which Bacon features prominently. Clairmont's future attitudes towards art grew out of his early appreciation of Bacon's aesthetic. Clairmont claimed "No-one can move us with paint as Bacon moves us. He is in his own words 'distorting into reality' - 'I distort reality to bring the reality of the object violently forward'".[260] Recalling the discussion on *Butterfly Mirror with Violet Flowers* (see chapter three), the concept of altering one's perceptions to reveal truths about the surrounding environment is an idea central to Clairmont's oeuvre and the direct influence of Bacon (amongst others). Clairmont concludes the section on Bacon by stating "Bacon's great strength lies in his readiness to take risks."[261] What Clairmont meant by this statement is unclear although it does suggest risk-taking as a strategy which extended beyond the canvas into a way of life.

Bacon's work raises some interesting issues in relation to the major themes of this thesis, particularly the artist's attitude towards religion and his embrace of Freudian psycho-analysis. Clairmont mirrored many of Bacon's understandings of religion and psychology which aids the interpretation of both Clairmont's religious imagery and Bacon's influence.

Davies and Yard wrote in 1986: "Expressing the Godless, essentially existentialist point of view that has persisted throughout his career, Bacon observed in 1962, "I think that man now realises that he is an accident, that he is a completely futile being, that he has to play out the game without reason".[262] Clairmont quoted this Bacon comment in his 'Art Thesis'. He claimed that

[259] Jim Barr, Interview with author, 28th July 1999.
[260] Philip Clairmont, *Art Thesis*, 1966, no pagination.
[261] Ibid.

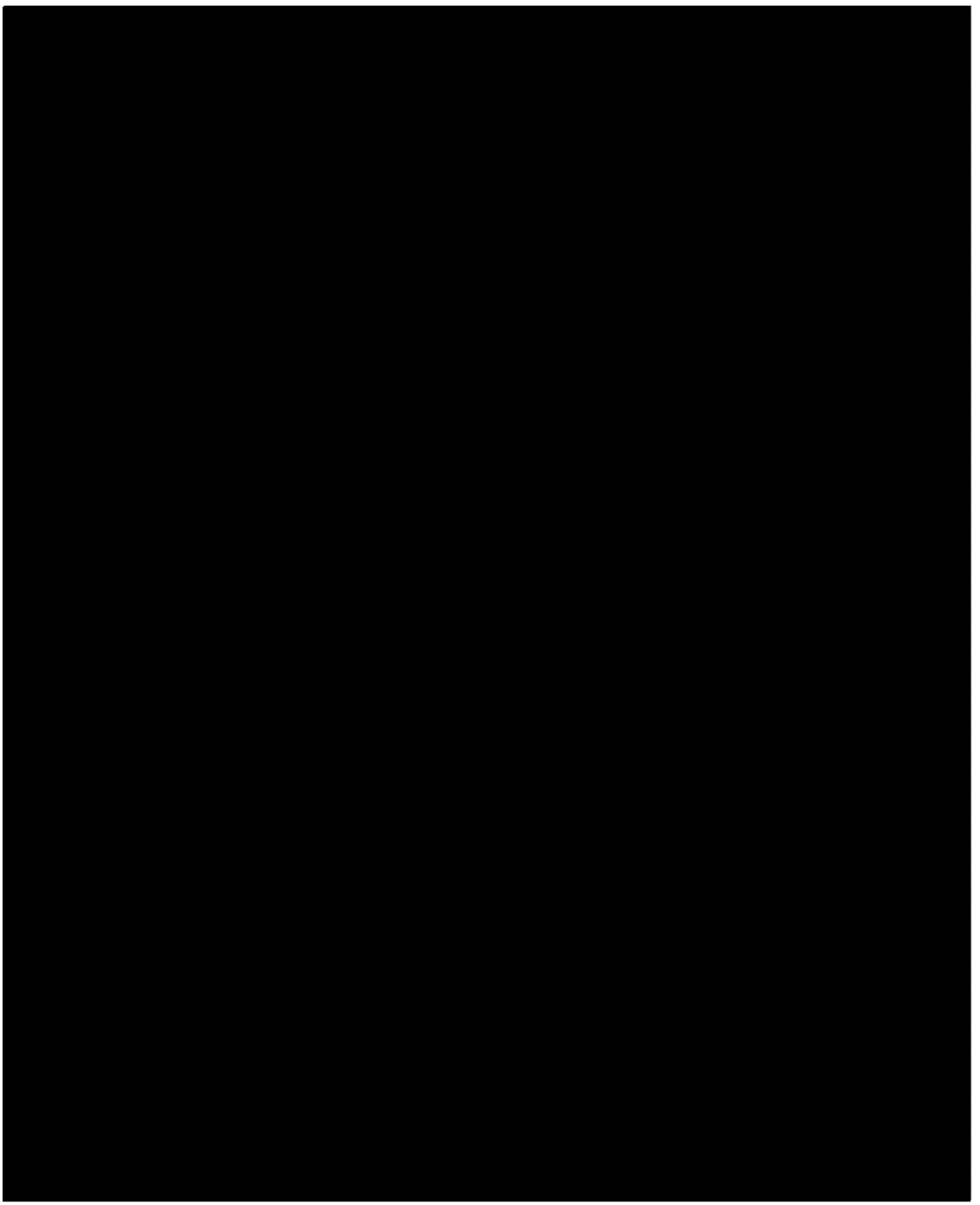

Figure 35: Francis Bacon,
Three Studies of Isabel Rawsthorne (on light ground) (1965)
Oil on canvas, 355mm x 305mm
coll: Private
(Borel: *Bacon: Portraits and Self-Portraits,* p.70)

Bacon and Graham Sutherland were two contemporary painters who reflected "the prevailing anxiety of our confused and existentialist world".[263] Existentialism is the belief that "man (*sic*) is nothing but what he makes of himself".[264] It was a conviction anticipated by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who declared in 1880 "God is dead".[265] The death of God movement grew from existentialist origins in the 1960s (see chapter one) and a trend towards the power of the individual, supported by the psycho-analytical concept of the unconscious. Secularism expanded in the arts - a consequence of existentialism. As early as 1888, Gauguin declared, "What beautiful ideas can be conjured up by means of form and colour now that we have no religious painting".[266] Bacon also rejected Christianity but continued to portray religious subject matter, specifically Popes (based on Velásquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X,* 1650*)*, and crucifixions.

Bacon's images of screaming Popes, a series of paintings from the early 1950s, clearly expressed his distain for the hierarchy and structure of the church as an institution. Alley contends that Bacon used church figures to contrapose his own identity as an artist: "The image of the vicar of Christ continues to obsess him as personifying the opposite of everything which he himself stands for: authority as against independence, stability as against flux and uncertainty, the public interest as distinct from the private".[267] Instead of attacking church figures and setting himself up in opposition to this institution, Clairmont was more interested in establishing similarities between his life and those of religious figures. *Our Lady* and *Holy Family* are two works which demonstrate the strong parallels Clairmont saw between his identity and that of Christ. Bacon focused on the human aspects of religion - the bureaucracy of the church; Clairmont focused on the divine aspects of religion - the events in the Bible. This difference may explain the more overt existentialist tendencies of Bacon, who expressed a far greater pessimism towards organised religion.

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[262] Hugh Davies and Sally Yard, *Francis Bacon,* 1986, p.44.
[263] Philip Clairmont, *Art Thesis*, 1966, no pagination.
[264] Mitchell Bedford, *Existentialism and Creativity,* 1972, p.8.
[265] Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, The Sacred and The Arts,* 1986, p.81.
[266] Quoted in Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century, vol.1,* 1961, 1965, 1968, p.28.
[267] Ronald Alley, *Francis Bacon,* 1964, p.20.

Commentators on Bacon's work wanted to distance his images of Crucifixions from the religion which inspired them. For example, Alley claims, "For Bacon, who is a non-believer, the Crucifixion has no religious significance and is just an extreme and most celebrated instance of man's behaviour to man".[268] Leiris reiterates this understanding: "the 'Crucifixions' WHKH, for the most part, have no iconographical relationship with the death of Christ but are elaborated in triptych form, as if for the purpose of edifying some ceremonial that has lost its content but kept the pattern of its ritual".[269] A work such as *Fragment of a Crucifixion,* 1950, **(figure 36)** bears faint resemblance to traditional portrayals of the Crucifixion, although to reject the religious connotations outright would be an overstatement. Interpretations of this work depend on the comparison with organised religion.

Clairmont, reflecting Bacon's influence yet again, spoke of his own portrayals of Crucifixions as "a dramatic way of showing the human predicament".[270] As we have seen however, Clairmont's understanding of religion did not include the menace and threat which Bacon portrayed. Although Clairmont tried to distance his Crucifixions from Christianity, the religious level of interpretation is integral to his work. Clairmont explored the iconography of numerous religions (for example: the Star of David, Buddha, the Virgin Mary) in order to make reference to those religions, not strip them of their religious meaning. Likewise, *Our Lady* is a seemingly secular image but is enriched by the religious symbolism which Clairmont incorporated.

Additional to the influence of Bacon's existentialist views, Clairmont was also inspired by Bacon's interpretation of psycho-analysis. Bacon was introduced to Freudian theory via a Surrealist art exhibition, the first of its kind in Britain in 1936.[271] Surrealism was an art movement of the 1920s which fully embraced Freudian theory. It is defined as "pure psychic automatism through which it is

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[268] Ibid, p.146.
[269] Michael Leiris, *Francis Bacon,* 1987, p.12.
[270] Quoted in Ross Fraser, Philip Clairmont Paints a Triptych, *Art New Zealand, no.11,* Spring 1978, p.41.
[271] Hugh Davies and Sally Yard, *Francis Bacon,* 1986, p.13.

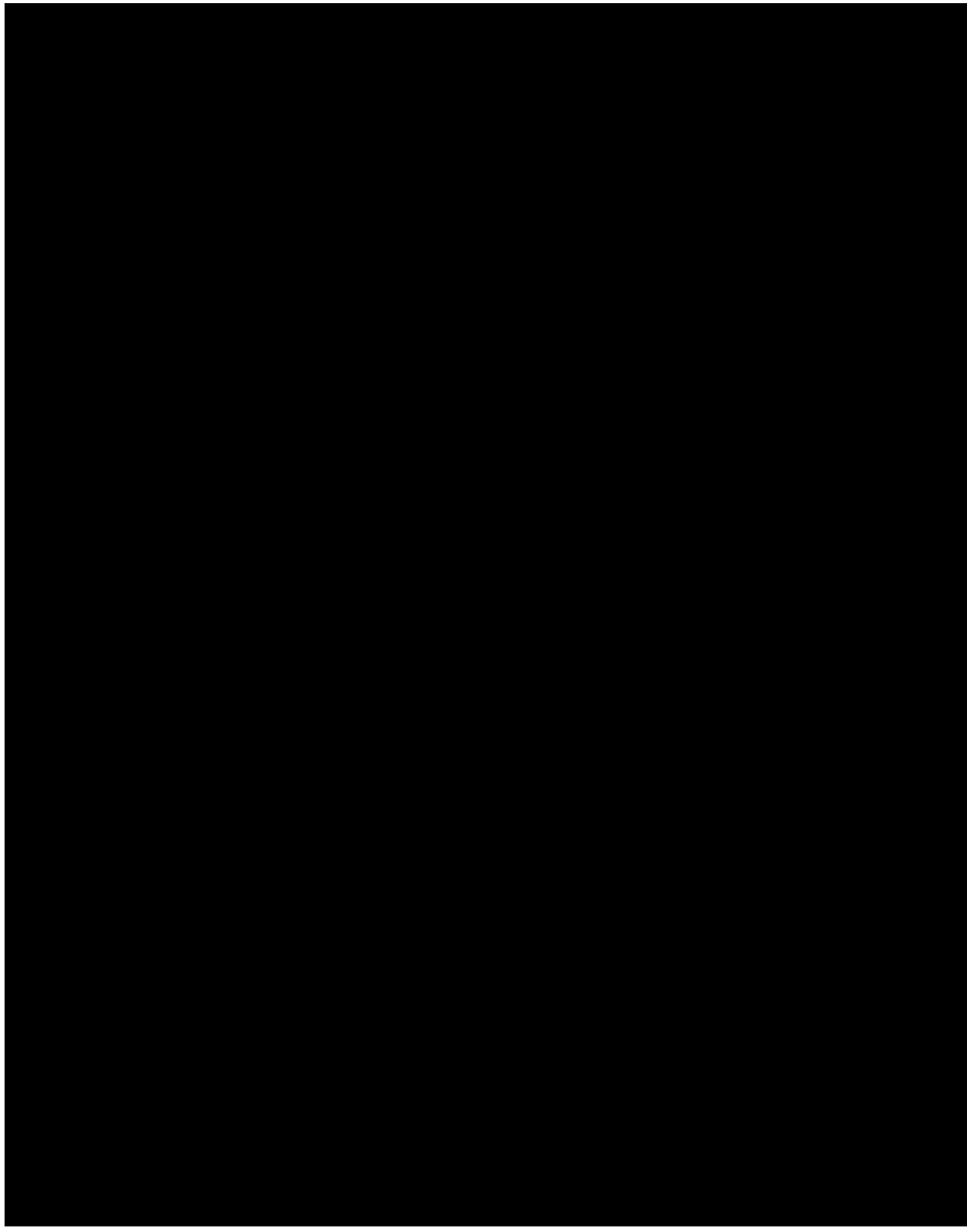

Figure 36: Francis Bacon, *Fragment of a Crucifixion* (1950)
Oil and cotton wool on canvas, 1390mm x 1080mm
coll: Van Abbémuseum, Eindhoven
(Usherwood, *The Bible in Twentieth Century Art,* p.77)

intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true functioning of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside any aesthetic or moral pre-occupation".[272] Clairmont was also greatly influenced by the Surrealists, Salvador Dali (1904-1989) and René Magritte (1898-1967) in particular. According to Edmond, "automatism allowed [Clairmont] to picture a world in transition, where everything seems on the verge of metamorphosis into something else."[273]

Demonstrating Surrealist influences, Bacon stated in 1973: "I rely on chance as much as possible and push the paint around until something happens. I think of myself as an instinctual painter, being as close as possible to the nervous system and the unconscious... we don't know how the nervous system works, there is this deep well from which things are drawn out, a reservoir of the unconscious".[274] References to the nervous system as a source of creativity are rare and may be particular to Bacon. Clairmont did not incorporate Bacon's interpretation of the nervous system into his own art theory, but he did share Bacon's understanding of the unconscious: he stated in 1980, "I'm not consciously trying to do anything except paint. The more of the unconscious that comes in the better".[275] Clairmont expressed a similar belief when describing his working methods for *Our Lady:* "...it was a very shaky start, didn't know what I was doing really. I must have known intuitively what I wanted to do, but I had no idea what I was actually doing".[276] Both Bacon and Clairmont attributed the source of their creativity to a force beyond consciousness and rationalisation. Prior to the twentieth century, this force was identified by religion as God and located in space; during the twentieth century, however, psychoanalysis attributed this force to the unconscious of the individual, making the role of God redundant.

When Clairmont portrayed his partner as the mother of Christ in *Our Lady*, he made certain assertions about himself. Religious iconography and symbolism

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[272] Quoted by Dawn Ades, Dada and Surrealism, in Nikos Stangos (ed.) *Concepts of Modern Art,* 1974, 1981, 1994, p.124.
[273] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.130.
[274] Quoted in Hugh Davies and Sally Yard, *Francis Bacon,* 1986, p.110.
[275] Bruce Morrison, *Profiles: Series of Films on New Zealand Artists,* 1981.

gained greater personal significance during this period and reflect Clairmont's experimentation with different modes of self-representation, possibly the result of changing drug practices. *Holy Family* is more explicit in the juxtaposition of the artist's life and the life of Christ. Again, symbolism is drawn from religious and art historical conventions and provides the key to the meaning of the work. As Bacon's influence shows, Clairmont drew inspiration from a variety of sources. Although the main areas of interest can be classifed under the headings art, religion and psychology, these three categories overlapped a great deal. Clairmont's understanding of each of these influences further complicates interpretations of his work but it also deepens the viewer's understanding of the imagery.

[276] Quoted in Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.163.

Figure 37: Philip Clairmont, *Self-Portrait at 33* (1983)
Linocut, 488 (diameter), edition of 30
(Thelma Clairmont)

Chapter Six: Self Portrait at 33 (1983)

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) wrote in 1886, "I prefer painting people's eyes to cathedrals, for there is something in the eyes that is not in the cathedral, however solemn and imposing the latter may be - a human soul... is more interesting to me".[277] Clairmont's eyes draw the viewer into his haunting print *Self-Portrait at 33,* 1983, **(figure 37)** and capture what van Gogh referred to as "the human soul." His intense gaze is central to the main theme of the work which is an examination of the artist's mind. Insanity,[278] whether it is discussed as Romantic phenomenon or psychological disfunction, has a trait common to both drug theory and religion: the experience of realities outside everyday perceptions. This idea appealed greatly to Clairmont. He altered his perception in numerous ways for the sake of his art. Van Gogh's influence is pivotal to understanding Clairmont's exploration of his own identity in *Self-Portrait at 33.*

Self Portrait at 33 was created the year preceding Clairmont's death. Due to the nature of the artist's demise and the intensity of expression within the print, there is a temptation to look for clues in the image to discover what finally led Clairmont to suicide. However, this pursuit is accompanied by the benefits of hindsight which can be misleading. When this print was created, the image was a continuation of Clairmont's oeuvre. Although *Self-Portrait at 33* should not be read as a suicide note, there were stresses in Clairmont's life and career which are visible in the print.

During the early 1980s Clairmont was compelled to contemplate death - not necessarily his own but the nature of death. His father, Rex Haines, died in 1982. Although Clairmont was raised by Thelma alone, he had attempted to develop a relationship with Rex in the mid-1970s. Edmond explains that despite "an irregular correspondence... the relationship between father and son

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[277] Tsukasa Ködera, *Vincent Van Gogh: Christianity versus Nature,* 1990, p.28.

[278] Although the politically correct term for insanity is mental illness, Clairmont was drawn to 19th century and early 20th century understandings of the mind. As a result, terms such as insanity and madness seem more appropriate.

was to remain tragically unresolved".[279] The loss of his father was compounded in 1983 by the death of Rudolf Gopas. Both these men were important figures in Clairmont's life. They were also both alcoholics, an affinity which may have provoked Clairmont to question his own drug use. The inclusion of his age, *"at 33"*, in the title of the print may be the result of Clairmont evaluating his own mortality. Clairmont was given the book *Short Lives*[280] at about this time. It is a collection of brief biographies of artists, writers, and performers, all of whom lived intensely and died young. Although the author, Katinka Matson, wanted to convey the tragedy of the loss, she implied that the destinies of those she wrote about were predetermined and their suicides were a Romantic inevitability.

Although Clairmont contemplated death frequently at this time, his fascination with it originated much earlier via his love of art. Clairmont shared Fomison's attraction to the macabre and darker side of life. At various points in his career, Clairmont painted crucifixions, overdoses, and war victims – all vivid reminders of mortality. His Auckland studio had 'Brutalise, not Beautify' scrawled across one wall. The appeal of mortality can be attributed in part to the Romantic tendencies of both Clairmont and Fomison, rather than a profound experience of death, such as the Expressionists had witnessed during the First World War. Edmond argues that the theme of death is central to Clairmont's work: "Mortality is not just the subject of much of Clairmont's work, it is also its nature; the works are about the mortality of objects, people and the self, but they are also themselves mortal, in the sense that they have their own disintegration built into them. They're not just analogous to the artist's body, in some sense they *are* him, and his image in almost every work is a literal reminder of this".[281]

When Thelma Clairmont first saw *Self-Portrait at 33*, she remarked on her son's "satanic" appearance; he simply responded "The world's a satanic place, Mum".[282] Such pessimism is not out of character for Clairmont, although the despondency implicit in such a statement reveals deeper problems in the

[279] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.154.
[280] Katinka Matson, *Short Lives,* 1981.
[281] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont,* 1999, p.210.

artist's life. The recent losses of his father and Gopas were compounded by difficulties in Clairmont's career. When he first appeared on the New Zealand art scene, Clairmont was heralded as a bright new talent but critics became increasingly hostile towards him in the early 1980s.

Clairmont's 1982 solo exhibition at the Denis Cohn Gallery in Auckland, entitled *New Paintings 1981-1982,* was greeted with a particularly negative response. Gordon Brown argued: "As is often the way with a Clairmont exhibition, the quality of what is displayed is uneven: but to some extent this inconsistency results from the hit or miss nature of the artist's working method." He also described Clairmont's work as "sloppy".[283] Cheryll Sotheran concurred with Brown's criticism: "Philip Clairmont's *New Paintings* at Denis Cohn are only new in a very literal sense. They don't break much new ground in subject matter or approach...".[284]

The most biting criticism Clairmont received was from Rob Taylor, a fellow artist who reviewed *Philip Clairmont: Paintings and Prints* (at the Janne Land Gallery in Wellington, June 1983): "Just as we might have thought Phil Clairmont had scraped the bottom of the barrel, he dragged another show together – his weakest yet".[285] Taylor argued that Clairmont's work peaked as early as 1972 and had steadily declined since. Naturally, Clairmont's friends responded angrily to the review. On closer reading, however, Taylor appears to be venting his frustration at Clairmont's self-destructive behaviour. Discussing the price of a Clairmont work, Taylor proposed, "If you've got that much money for him, wave it under his nose and lure him into treatment".[286]

Martin Edmond, a staunch supporter of Clairmont and his work, expresses strong opinions on the artist's 'deterioration': "The Barrs' abandonment of Clairmont towards the end of the 1970s marked the beginning of his decline as a selling artist, a decline which became so severe that he was ultimately

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[282] Thelma Clairmont, interview with author, 17th September 1999.
[283] Gordon Brown, Philip Clairmont: New Paintings 1981-1982, *Art New Zealand, no.25,* December 1982, p.13.
[284] Cheryll Sotheran, Rescued By Sheer Vigour, *Auckland Star,* 6th September 1982.
[285] Rob Taylor, Philip Clairmont-Janne Land Gallery, *Salient,* 30th May 1983.

altogether bereft of sales. At the time this decline was represented as a falling off in the quality of his work but in retrospect it seems clear that only Clairmont's saleability had been affected".[287] In comparison, Michael Dunn recalls Clairmont's situation far less bleakly: "By the time of his death in 1984 Clairmont was famous and his work keenly sought after".[288] In light of the above reviews, it appears Edmond's interpretation is more accurate than Dunn's. Dunn's recollection was probably influenced by the post humous retrospective *Philip Clairmont.* This exhibition toured New Zealand in 1987/1988, returning Clairmont's name to glowing reviews and media attention. Adam Gifford noticed at the time of the show, "now even his drawings will sell at auction for more than Clairmont ever cleared for a painting".[289] Similarly, Michael Morrissey stated, "Clairmont's early death has brought an increased interest in his paintings, and inevitably an increase in their value".[290]

Post humous financial success was also the fate of van Gogh. Once an artist's body of work is rendered finite by his/her death, the financial value of that work increases dramatically. This pattern became a well-worn stereotype: the misunderstood genius and outsider gains fame and acceptance but, tragically, only after their demise. Van Gogh, who only sold a few works within his lifetime, is now a name associated with some of the most valuable paintings in the world. On a smaller scale, a 'Clairmont' original commands a price in the contemporary market well beyond what the artist would have probably made had he survived. In 1999, Tinakori Gallery in Wellington asked $22,500 for an early portrait of Viki, a price far exceeding those of the other works for sale.

Taking into consideration his personal losses and career crises over the preceding few years, it stands to reason that Clairmont would perceive the world as hostile. He portrayed himself in *Self-Portrait at 33* in a darkened room, possibly reflecting a desire to retreat from the glare of the media spotlight. Clairmont's public persona of a suffering artist is still visible (symbolically)

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[286] Ibid.
[287] Martin Edmond, *Chemical Evolution: Drugs and Art Production 1970-1980,* 1997, p.34.
[288] Michael Dunn, Painting Since 1970, in Gil Docking *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting,* 1971, 1975, 1980, 1982, 1990, p.209.
[289] Adam Gifford, The Man and Myth, *Sunday Star Times*, 9th August 1987.

through the window to his left. The composition brings to mind van Gogh's *Weaver Near an Open Window,* 1884, **(figure 38).** This work also shows a figure in a darkened room. Through a window to the weaver's left, one can see a church in the distance (in *Self-Portrait at 33,* a Cross replaces the church, but both are references to Christianity). Clairmont may have even based the composition of *Self-Portrait at 33* on this particular work.

However, unlike *Weaver Near an Open Window, Self Portrait at 33* is a linocut. The print medium was important within Clairmont's oeuvre. Clairmont was inspired predominantly by the prints of the German Expressionists Heckel and Kirchner, artists who in turn were inspired by the 'primitivism' of African carvings and European folk art. In 1974, an exhibition entitled *The Graphic Art of German Expressionism* was shown in Wellington. Edmond suggests that this exhibition "played a part in [Clairmont's] return to printmaking".[291] As members of Die Brücke, Heckel and Kirchner played crucial roles in revolutionising print making and are credited with creating "one of the turning points in the history of the medium".[292] Their prints differed from those of their predecessors because they emphasised the texture of the material from which the print was cut and they produced the majority of their own prints (instead of sending drawings to professional printers).[293] Heckel's prints are of particular relevance to *Self-Portrait at 33.* A print such as *Die Töte (The Dead Woman),* 1912, **(figure 39)** which was part of a series entitled *The Creators II,* illustrates Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot.* According to Priester, the themes of these works are madness and insanity, the latter of which Heckel explored frequently in his work.[294] The distorted facial features of the left-hand figure in *Dead Woman* were Heckel's attempt to portray madness, as Clairmont attempted in *Self-Portrait at 33.*

Although the German Expressionists used a variety of printing techniques, Clairmont only used woodcuts and linocuts. *Self-Portrait,* 1978, **(figure 40)** is a

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[290] Michael Morrissey, The Magic of Clairmont, *New Zealand Herald,* 20th August 1987.
[291] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont* 1999, p.148.
[292] Frances Carey and Antony Griffiths, *The Print in Germany (1880-1933): The Age of Expressionism,* 1984, p.18.
[293] Ibid, p.14 & 32.

Figure 38: Vincent Van Gogh, *Weaver near an Open Window* (1884)
Oil on canvas on cardboard, 685mm x 930mm
coll: Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich
(Stein, *Van Gogh: a Retrospective*, p.40)

Figure 39: Erich Heckel, *Die Töte (The Dead Woman)* (1912)
Woodcut on wove paper, 250mm x 297mm, (edition of 125)
(Priester, *Inner Visions...*, p.54)

Figure 40: Philip Clairmont, *Self-Portrait* (1978)
Linocut, 275mm x 208mm
coll: Paris family
(Barrs' *Philip Clairmont,* p.42)

linocut which also brings to mind German Expressionist prints. The stylised nude, framed to the right of the composition, recalls the German Expressionist exploration of 'primitivism', particularly African statuary. German Expressionist prints also evoke a strong mystical quality, evident in Clairmont's self-portraits. Gustav Hartlaub "credited [Die Brücke] with raising 'the art of black and white in Germany to the direct symbolic and gestural language of inner aggitation'".[295] Similarly, Rosa Schapire claimed, "the most secret mysteries of the soul reveal themselves in black and white".[296] The simplicity of black and white equated for these commentators with immediacy of experience and directness of expression in a manner which painting does not. Supposedly, Clairmont's self-portrait prints reveal more effectively than painting "inner aggitation" and "the secret mysteries of the soul."

Self-portraiture played an important role within Clairmont's oeuvre. It enabled him to question his own identity, often by incorporating the identity of others. Edmond explains: "... his strategy was essentially personal, he took it on faith that each of us contains a multitude and identified in himself all the faces of humanity he could find. He became a Nazi, a Jew, a Christ, an Ayatollah, a savant, a village idiot, a revolutionary, a suicide, a ghost".[297]

In 1981, Clairmont made the woodcut *Head of Christ* **(figure 41)**; clearly a self-portrait complete with crown of thorns and shed tear. Although critics and art historians often neglected the religious elements of Clairmont's work, his self-portraits present an exception. Religious influences are mentioned frequently, often to the point of repetition: "Clairmont as martyr, as appraising artist";[298] "Clairmont sees himself in a Christ-like role";[299] "Sometimes he appears as a saint, sometimes as a devil";[300] "He portrays himself as a haunted, tortured figure, by turns satanic or Christ-like";[301] "... almost devil-like with black face and

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[294] Mary Priester, *Inner Vision: German Prints from the Age of Expressionism,* 1992, p.54.
[295] Ibid, p.2.
[296] Ibid, p.2.
[297] Martin Edmond, *Chemical Evolution: Drugs and Art Production 1970-1980,* 1997, p.28.
[298] Richard Dingwall, Outside from the Inside, *The New Zealand Listener,* 7th May 1988.
[299] Elva Bett, Clairmont Works Renew Themselves Each Viewing, *Dominion*, 1st June 1983.
[300] T.J. McNamara, *New Zealand Herald,* 18th May 1984.
[301] Alexa Johnston, *Anxious Images: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art,* 1984, p.11.

Figure 41: Philip Clairmont, *Head of Christ* (1981)
Linocut
(Barr, *Philip Clairmont,* p.9)

starring eyes";[302] "...gaunt, tortured face; the sunken piercing eyes...".[303] Clairmont's close identification with Christ in *Head of Christ* is reversed in *Self-Portrait at 33.* The two identities are again distinct: Clairmont appears in the foreground; a Cross, symbolising Christ, is located in the distant background. Clairmont told his friend Paul Rossiter that the Cross was for both his father and himself,[304] representing both his grief and his morbidity respectively. Of his many self-portraits, *Self-Portrait at 33* is the most susceptible to interpretations of demonic content. Even his mother saw this aspect in his work. However, Clairmont's response ("the world's a satanic place"[305]) does not confirm an affiliation between his identity and the Devil. "Satanic" was Thelma's choice of words, not his.

Clairmont's self-portraits extend beyond his personal and immediate experiences and incorporate broader themes. As we have seen, Clairmont strongly identified with Kirchner's roles as a painter and a soldier (see chapter two). Although Clairmont never faced combat, as Kirchner had done, he played vicarious witness to the First World War by adopting aspects of Kirchner's identity. Similarly, when Clairmont portrayed himself as Christ, he was incorporating themes of religion and especially Catholicism. As Christ, Clairmont could also suffer vicariously for the sins of the world.

Self-Portrait at 33 is a study of the mind. More specifically, it is a study of the mind as it exists outside mainstream society. Clairmont rejected the socially-defined, restricted world of rational thinking to join those on the outskirts of society: the other misunderstood artists, geniuses and "madmen". Martin Edmond recalls Clairmont explaining his approach to painting: "His advice was to create discordant motifs - motifs that shock, that are totally unacceptable to the human condition. This, he added, was stage one of insanity".[306] Mental illness was not purely a Romantic, abstract notion for Clairmont; it affected him and many important people in his life. He was afflicited with Borderline

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[302] Michael Dunn, *Figurative Artists Now: Nine New Zealand Artists*, 1975, p.11.
[303] Elva Bett, *Portrait of a Dealer Gallery in Wellington: the Elva Bett Gallery*, 1998, p.50.
[304] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont*, 1999, p.172.
[305] Thelma Clairmont, interview with author, 17th September 1999.
[306] Martin Edmod, *Chemical Evolution...*, 1997, p.13.

Personality Disorder, a diagnosis given when an individual meets five of the following nine requirements:

Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment; a pattern of intense personal relationships alternating between extremes of love and hate; an unstable sense of self; extreme impulsivity, especially in regard to substance abuse, reckless driving, binge eating, spending, sex and so on; recurrent suicidal behaviour; reactivity of mood, with episodes of extreme anxiety, irritability and mental unease; chronic feelings of emptiness;extreme anger or difficulty controlling anger; and transient, stress-related paranoia.[307]

Clairmont's father spent over seven years in a psychiatric hospital in Tokanui; Gopas "was a schizophrenic, and suffering from delusions of grandeur which affected his teaching and led to a number of sojourns in Sunnyside Psychiatric Hospital";[308] Allen Maddox, another of Clairmont's close friends from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, is also schizophrenic. Clairmont did not have to imagine the distorted perceptions of madness - he was surrounded by them. Just as Kirchner enabled Clairmont to envision war, and Christ enabled Clairmont to experience religion, van Gogh was the means by which Clairmont explored insanity.

Van Gogh descended from the Romantic tradition, a movement which dominated the arts during the first half of the nineteenth century in Europe. He was even credited with "[bringing] about in the young a relapse into Romanticism".[309] Many of Clairmont's favourite artists were Romantics (Francisco Goya, William Blake). As with Expressionism, Clairmont's interest in Romanticism went beyond a simple reproduction of 'Romantic' imagery; he incorporated the theories and philosophies of the time into his own identity as an artist and his understanding of the function of painting.

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[307] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont*, 1999, p.223.
[308] Ibid, p.47.
[309] Maurice Denis, From Gauguin and Van Gogh to Classicism (1909), in Susan Alyson Stein (ed.) *Van Gogh: A Retrospective,* 1986, p.337.

Clairmont's image of 'the artist', expressed clearly in *Self-Portrait at 33,* was based on Romantic constructs: "A large part of the cultural definition of artists since last century Romanticism has been the notorious bohemian lifestyle; an almost unambiguous public symbol of an artist. It has ensured a very clear line was drawn between the artist and his audience".[310] Romantic artists saw themselves as visionaries, outside the confines of society. Blake, for example, "had himself seen spirits of another plane of existence: his brother Robert, 'clapping his hands for joy' as he rose through the ceiling, and other special visitants, real or imagined, throughout his life".[311] From their apparently isolated position, Romantic artists were able to create imagery that reflected the particular genius of the individual.

These Romantic values were continued in New Zealand during the 1970s and 1980s by Fomison, who was recognised as a Romantic figure.[312] He expressed in *Spleen* his Romantic belief that painting is a special art form: "painting can be seen as a solitary calling: the painter is soloist, the paint brush a single handled implement. Painting is uniquely suited to be a vehicle for *singular* vision".[313] Clairmont expressed a similar opinion in an interview with Hamish Keith: "Painting is a lonely affair in the sense that only you can do what you're doing. So each person is unique in that sense, it has a uniqueness about it. Certainly if it's going to develop it has to retain that".[314] Nigel Brown recalls: "Phil was not overly concerned with imperfections in the printing as he thought such features made them individual. Finger prints around the edges of the paper were almost cultivated".[315]

Clairmont developed a parallel between his own identity and the popular van Gogh mythology. This possibly originated in their mutual fascination with the Romantic persona but was cultivated by Clairmont who seemed to inhabit borrowed identities. Nigel Brown stated, "He perpetuated myths and stories

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[310] Jim and Mary Barr, *Philip Clairmont,* 1987, p.57.
[311] Kathleen Raine, *William Blake, 1970, 1996,* p.112.
[312] Alexa Johnston, *Anxious Images: Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art,* 1984, p.29.
[313] Tony Fomison, The Cart Horses of Paris, *Spleen no.1,* January 1976.
[314] Philip Clairmont, interview with Hamish Keith, 9th March 1981, p.8.
[315] Nigel Brown, personal correspondence to author, 7th July 1999.

and sometimes I found with him reality became blurred".[316] There is a strong physiognomic likeness between *Self-Portrait at 33* and van Gogh's *Self-Portrait,* 1889, **(figure 42)**. This was probably intentional. The unruly hair, high forehead, prominent brow, intense gaze, long and slightly crooked nose, and bristly beard are features common to both. Clairmont presumably wanted to capture in *Self-Portrait at 33* the response van Gogh's appearance elicited: "I still see him sitting on the bench in front of the window of the little café, with his cut off ear and bewildered eyes in which there was something insane and into which I dared not look".[317] Van Gogh painted two self-portraits which prominently display his self-mutilation: *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear,* 1889, **(figure 43)** and *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe,* 1889, **(figure 44)**. These works are reminiscent of the Kirchner self-portrait which had such a tremendous impact on Clairmont - *Self-Portrait as Soldier,* 1915 **(figure 8)**.

Although Kirchner's injury was fictitious, both he and van Gogh portrayed themselves physically deformed, possibly symbolising the psychological turmoil each experienced. Clairmont portrayed himself in a similar manner to advertise his exhibition, *New Images, A Variety of Media,* **(figure 45)** shown at the Denis Cohn Gallery in 1980. He is viewed from behind, sitting on a stool whilst painting. He is decapitated and naked, resembling a plucked chicken rather than a human torso. The original title of this work, recorded in one of Clairmont's notebooks, is *Headless Painter in the Act of Painting and Disintegration Using His Own Blood.*[318] A similarly gruesome title of an earlier work, *Castrated Artist, Victim of Cultural Strangulation,* 1976, shows Clairmont's anger with the local art scene and confirms his stance as the 'outsider artist'.

In 1975, Clairmont visited the *Van Gogh in Auckland* exhibition. The show had only eight works, reflecting both the geographic and artistic isolation of New Zealand during the 1970s. Despite such limitations, it was a valuable opportunity for Clairmont to experience van Gogh's colour and technique firsthand. Clairmont painted *Self-Portrait in Memory of Van Gogh,* 1975,

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[316] Ibid, 9th July 1999.
[317] Letter from Anton Hirschig to Dr. A Bredius, Recollections of Vincent Van Gogh (1934), in Susan Alyson Stein (ed.) *Van Gogh: A Retrospective,* 1986, p.210.

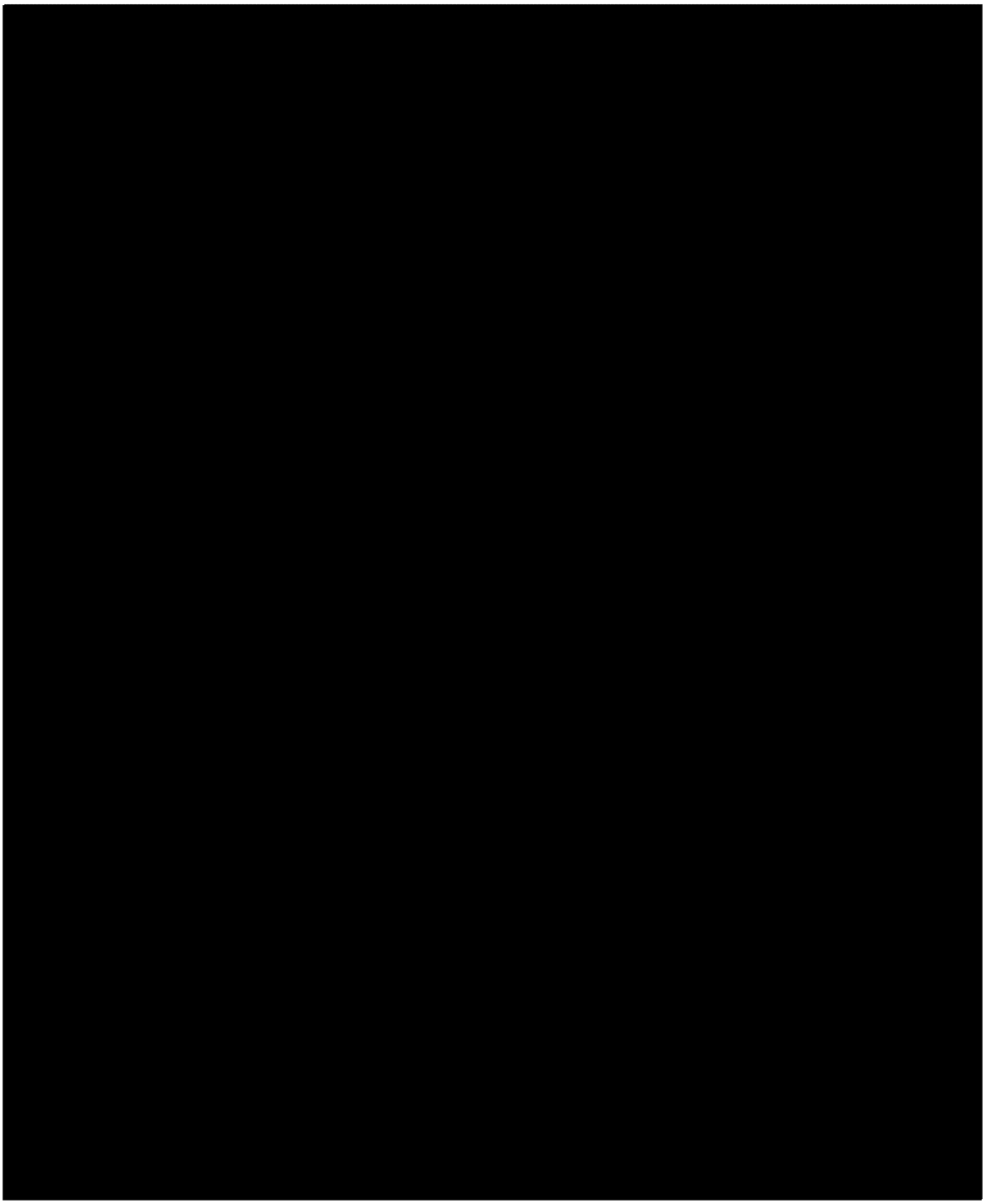

Figure 42: Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait* (1889)
Oil on canvas, 650mm x 540mm
coll: Musée d'Orsay, Paris
(Stein, *Van Gogh: a Retrospective*, p.272)

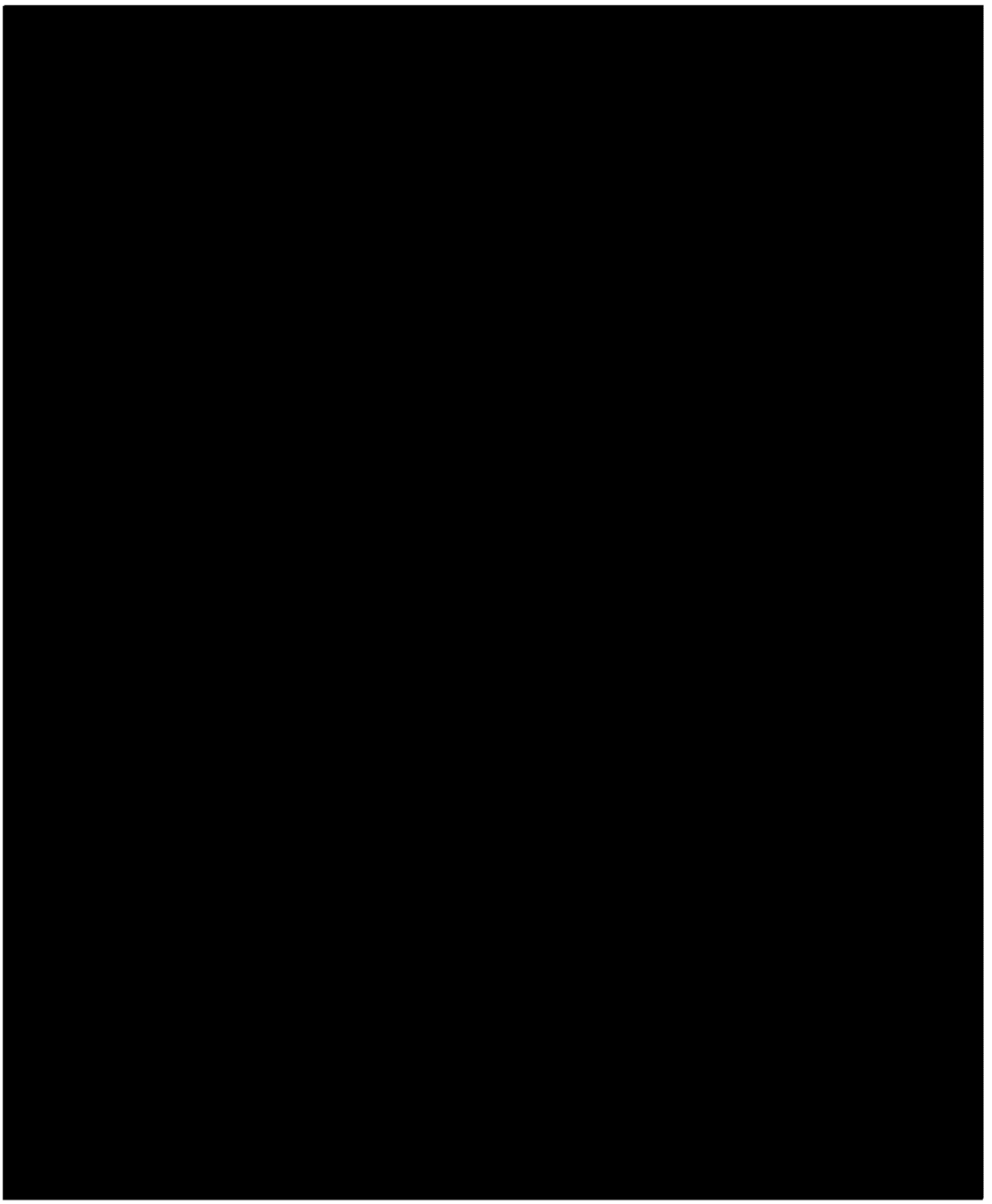

Figure 43: Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889)
Oil on canvas, 600mm x 490mm
coll: Courthauld Institute Galleries, London
(Stein, *Van Gogh: a Retrospective*, p.337)

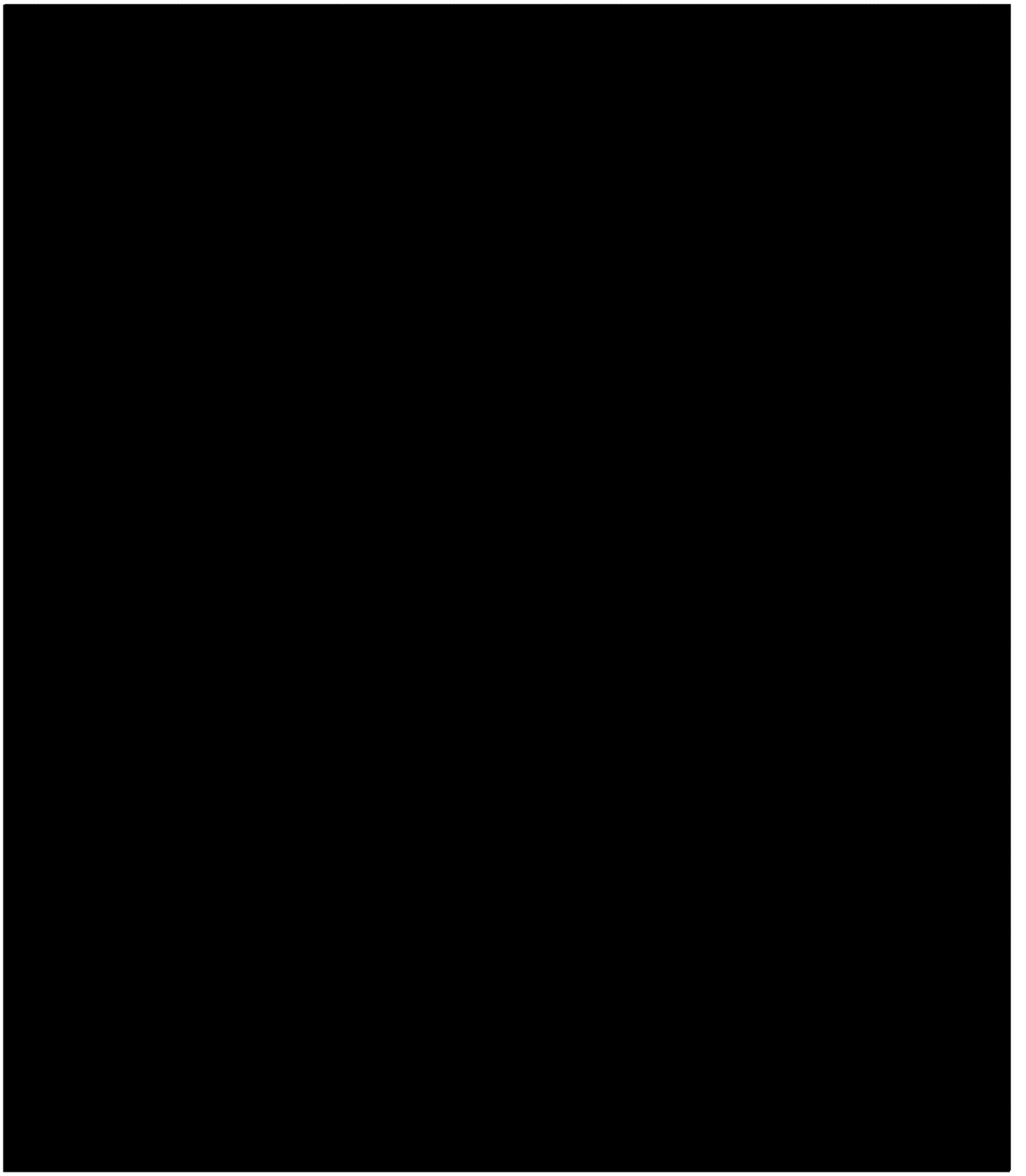

Figure 44: Vincent Van Gogh,
Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe (1889)
Oil on canvas, 510mm x 450mm
private collection
(Stein, *Van Gogh: a Retrospective*, p.223)

Figure 45: Philip Clairmont, *New Images: A Variety of Media* (1980)
Poster for Denis Cohn exhibition of same name, 1980.
Ink on paper
(Thelma Clairmont)

(figure 46) the same year. This work precedes Clairmont's examination of the same subject matter in *Self Portrait at 33* (namely, van Gogh and insanity relative to the artist's own image). He also painted *Van Gogh's Sun,* 1978, and *Yellow Chair (with Hibiscus),* 1979/80, a few years later. Howie Cook recalls postcards of van Gogh's work displayed on the wall of Clairmont's studio,[319] certainly a continuous point of reference and source of inspiration.

Although Expressionism was an important part of van Gogh's influence, his madness also held great appeal. Clairmont believed that painting required "a derangement of the senses and a bombardment of the senses".[320] In fact, popular understanding of the relationship between van Gogh's mind and his vivid paintings bears a striking resemblance to criticism of Clairmont and his work. Stein contends "van Gogh's work has suffered under the burdens of his biography",[321] an observation frequently made of Clarimont's oeuvre. For example, Taylor claims that, "the literature defining the myth of Clairmont as the *enfant terrible* of New Zealand expressionism has droolingly glorified the passion and rage, the risk, the drugs, the despair".[322]

The pairing of the Romantic mind with insanity was reinforced by the unstable mental condition of some of the leading artists of the nineteenth century (of which van Gogh is a primary example). Francis Reitman, for example, suggests that Goya was a "manic-depressive type"[323] and Blake experienced many visions which would require treatment had he been working today. The association between Romanticism and insanity continued well into the twentieth century. Ernst Kris claims "...from what is known at present [1953] we may deduce that the artist whose creative capacities are close to potential pathology will find his (*sic*) place more easily in 'Romantic' than 'Classical' periods of art".[324] Clairmont must have also experienced this attitude; he stated "some

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[318] Martin Edmond, *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont*, 1999, p.164.
[319] Howie Cook, Phil Clairmont, *Play-Space Trust Publication,* June 1984, p.4.
[320] Quoted in Ross Fraser, Philip Clairmont Paints a Triptych, *Art New Zealand, no.11,* Spring 1978, p.41.
[321] Susan Alyson Stein (ed.) *Van Gogh: A Retrospective,* 1986, p.27.
[322] Rob Taylor, Uneven Show Reveals Tragic Life of Clairmont, *The Dominion,* 17th May 1989.
[323] Francis Reitman, *Psychotic Art,* 1950, p.147.
[324] Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, 1953, p.30.

Figure 46: Philip Clairmont, *Self-Portrait in Memory of Van Gogh* (1975)
oil on canvas, 889mm x 508mm
whereabouts unknown
(*Spleen no.4,* no pagination)

people would say that painters should be hermits, locked away in a padded cell, or something".[325]

John MacGregor explains that the Romantic fascination with madness was part of a broader interest in the intensification of experience: "The Romantic artist worshipped at the altar of emotion. Throughout the period one encounters a deep, almost unappeasable hunger for emotional experience, for new intensities of feeling at whatever cost. It is as if reality could only be experienced in situations of violence, or ecstasy, or madness. Insanity is understood, perhaps naively, as a form of heightened existence, as a state of pure emotion free of the restraints imposed by the mind, the polar opposite to the mind governed by intellect and reason".[326] The connotations of irrationality and a loss of conscious control were viewed favourably by the Expressionists. MacGregor explains: "As we have seen, artists at the beginning of the century were seeking primitive and violent visual means. They sought purity of expression in their work, a vision of reality free of tradition and convention. In the context of this quest of unusual intensity and violence, comparison with the products of the mind of a madman, while intended as hostile criticism, was accepted as proof of a successful journey into the truly unknown".[327]

Artistic inspiration and religious ecstasy, previously thought to be the voice of God working through the medium of the artist or prophet, became the focus of clinical observation in the twentieth century and were discussed in terms of psychiatric disturbance. Watts Jnr. explains: "it is our hypothesis that the characteristics of mysticism can be interpreted as symptoms of mental illness. Since mental illness is an accepted, institutionalised symbolic universe, the behaviour that is considered by some to be mystical is considered by others ... to be symptomatic of mental illness".[328]

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[325] Bruce Morrison, *Profiles: Series of Films on New Zealand Artists,* 1981.
[326] John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane,* 1989, p.68.
[327] Ibid, p.9.
[328] W. David Watts Jnr., *The Psychedelic Experience: A Sociological Study*, 1971, p.66.

Freud defined the unconscious in 1915 as, "the deepest strata of our minds, made up of instinctual processes".[329] In comparison, the subconscious involves "mental processes... outside of conscious awareness but accessible to consciousness when nececssary".[330] Werner Haftmann interprets Vincent van Gogh's decline into insanity as an excessive exploration of the unconscious. Without the reason of the conscious mind nor the structure of symbolism, van Gogh was lost into madness, overwhelmed by the imagination: "In his creative fervour his personal vision became an hallucinated vision of the depths. As in a trance, the artist felt his way to the core of things and there lay his heart ... His mind, liberated from its armour of consciousness, was enabled to rediscover itself in the symbol. But when in his trance he made a false move, when the redeeming symbol failed to take form, the violence of his impetus flung him into the abyss of madness".[331]

Freudian psychology, known as psychoanalysis, contributed to Clairmont's concept of art. Clairmont wrote of "the great Sigmund Freud" as "the father of modern psychology".[332] Thelma owned books by Freud when Clairmont was growing up, exposing him to these ideas from an early age.[333] Ködera argues "in the 1960s and also 1970s several psychological and psychoanalytical studies on van Gogh were published and were even welcomed, at least temporarily".[334] This suggests Clairmont may have had initial exposure to van Gogh via psychology, not art history.

Kris outlines one of Freud's main contributions to art theories: "... one of the baffling and most complex questions of traditional aesthetics [is] the pleasure in the unpleasant in art - and hence to the question of how tragedy is possible. Art, it is said, releases unconscious tensions and "purges" the soul. This view is frequently attributed to Aristotle and considered the common denominator between his theory and that of Freud who adopted, for the first step in

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329 Sigmund Freud, *On Creativity and the Unconscious,* 1958, p.231.
330 Carole Wade and Carol Tavris, *Psychology*, 1993, p.G-11.
331 Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century*, 1961, 1965, 1968, p.25.
332 Philip Clairmont, *Art Thesis*, 1966, no pagination.
333 Thelma Clairmont, interview with author, 17th September 1999.
334 Tsukasa Ködera, *Vincent Van Gogh: Christianity versus Nature,* 1990, p.4.

psychoanalytic therapy, the Aristotelian term: kathartic".[335] Clairmont took this idea to heart. Quoting Francis Bacon, he claimed in 1966 that "painting is valueless if not on a tragic scale".[336] Again, in 1980, he expressed a similar view: "I guess when you look at it most of my painting is theraupeutic".[337] With characteristic humour, however, he went on to say: "Still, it's probably better than weaving baskets".[338]

Self-Portrait at 33 raises a number of issues related to self-identity and the functioning of the mind. Clairmont's interest in insanity conformed with his other interests in religion and drug use: all three assumed a division between 'normal' existence and hyper-real experience. Clairmont's understanding of the mind was shaped by psychological theories originating in the early twentieth century (Freudian psychoanalysis in particular) and Romantic ideals in art from the early nineteenth century. Clairmont related to van Gogh for numerous reasons, visually apparent in *Self-Portrait at 33*: he admired van Gogh's use of colour and vibrant self-expression; he identified with van Gogh's reputation as an "outsider artist"; and he appreciated the distorted perceptions van Gogh's mental illness inflicted upon him. Romanticised views of insanity have a stronger spiritual component than contemporary scientific analysis and treatment. It is likely that Clairmont also viewed insanity as a liberation from rationality and believed individuals such as van Gogh were offered insights into worlds unimaginable to mainstream society.

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[335] Ernst Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, 1953, p.45.
[336] Philip Clairmont, *Art thesis*, 1966, no pagination.
[337] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters,* 1980, p.48.
[338] Ibid, p.48.

Conclusion

In chapter four, Clairmont is quoted as saying, "I'm not consciously trying to do anything except paint. The more of the unconscious that comes in the better".[339] And he is also quoted in chapter three as saying, "The main thing is to bring out the essence of the object for the viewer. The reality behind the surface of appearances".[340] A consideration of both the artist's vision and the viewer's interpretation leads to a thorough examination of Clairmont's "neglected religion". Clairmont used religious iconography and symbolism in his work to convey a variety of political, social and personal concerns. However, he was neither a practising Christian, nor did he adhere to a single faith. He could have chosen to portray his concerns through alternative secular means more consistent with his lifestyle, yet he turned repeatedly to Catholic, Buddhist, Jewish, and Moslem motifs. This raises the central question: Why did Clairmont use religion in his art?

The discrepancy between Clairmont's use of religious imagery and his secular lifestyle can be better understood by broadening the scope of spirituality to include the influence religion has had on otherwise secular practices such as psychoanalysis, drugs and art. A secondary issue involves the reception of these works. Despite Clairmont's blatant and frequent use of religious imagery, this fundamental aspect has continually been overshadowed by the artist's colourful biography and assumptions about expressionism in New Zealand. Why do critics and art historians disregard Clairmont's use of religion? Answering these questions sheds light on the essential components of Clairmont's work and the bias with which these works have been interpreted.

It is astonishing that the artist's use of religious imagery has been so rarely mentioned and so inadequately interpreted. A possible explanation stems from art historical constructs within New Zealand which defined both expressionism and the indicators of "New Zealand art". Expressionism in New Zealand was recognised in part by the personality of the artist. As seen in chapter two,

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[339] Bruce Morrison, *Profiles: Series of Films on New Zealand Artists,* 1981.

figures such as van der Velden and Gopas continued in New Zealand the expressionist myth first established in Europe by artists such as van Gogh and Kirchner. New Zealand audiences of the 1950s and 1960s expected the intense energy and colour of an artist's work to be catalysed by mental instability and erratic behaviour. Clairmont's imagery was as well known as his drug-use; his affiliation with artists such as Fomison and Allen Maddox, infamous for their outrageous behaviour, also confirmed his role as "*enfant terrible* of New Zealand art".[341] Jim and Mary Barr summarise how Clairmont is generally perceived: "[He] held to the Romantic myth of the artist as a visionary and seer, and he lived ardently in the conventional pose of bohemian and outsider".[342] Judging by the title of his painting, *Castrated Artist, Victim of Cultural Strangulation,* 1976, Clairmont felt isolated and misunderstood as an artist. His comment that "some people would say painters should be hermits, locked away in a padded cell, or something",[343] (quoted in chapter six) demonstrates how Clairmont believed others saw him. Despite Clairmont's feelings of persecution, it can also be argued that he did little to contradict the established stereotype.

Clairmont was classified as an outsider also because expressionism was considered of minor relevance to New Zealand art. Stewart McLennan wrote in 1957, "there is little manifestation of Expressionism in New Zealand... As a nation... we are, on the whole, too practical and too fully occupied to be intrigued by Surrealism...".[344] Brown and Keith reiterated this understanding in *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1980,* 1982. Of Gopas, they wrote, "... with leanings towards German Expressionism, a style not entirely favoured by New Zealanders, he did confront the local painter with ideas few had thought about".[345] Brown and Keith also grouped Clairmont with other recognised expressionists Fomison and Trusttum under the title of

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[340] Quoted in Jim and Mary Barr, *Contemporary New Zealand Painters,* 1980, p.40.
[341] Neil Roberts, *Heaven and Blood: Painting and Drawing by Alan Pearson 1959-1999,* 1999, p.10.
[342] Jim and Mary Barr, *Philip Clairmont,* 1987, p.60.
[343] Bruce Morrison, *Profiles: Series of Films on New Zealand Artists,* 1981.
[344] Quoted in Tim Walker, Thank God I'm an Optimist, *Art New Zealand, no.48,* Spring 1988, p.71.
[345] Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting 1839-1980,* 1982, p.146.

"conservative".[346] Within such a context, expressionism was not viewed favourably. In 1978, TJ McNamara accused Clairmont of being "guilty of pointless excesses of expression".[347] McNamara's interpretation of Clairmont's work is typical of New Zealand art historians and critics: the criticism, whether positive or negative, concentrated on the expressionist qualities (vibrant colour, distorted form, atmosphere of foreboding) to the exclusion of all other influences.

McCahon, Fomison and Brown are three New Zealand artists recognised for their use of religious imagery (see chapter five). An adherence to the principles of New Zealand painting - "the landscape and the light"[348] - distinguished their work from Clairmont's (not necessarily a conscious choice on the part of the artists, but possibly a tidy retrospective categorisation by art historians). As we have seen, McCahon used the Nelson and Otago hills as a dramatic backdrop to his Biblical scenes.[349] Fomison was not drawn to the land, but to Maori and Samoan culture and religion which he depicted in dark figurative imagery. Brown, under the influence of McCahon, was also fascinated by the distinctive New Zealand landscape and its inhabitants.[350] The manner in which these artists depicted religious imagery was inextricably bound to the New Zealand experience of land and culture. Consequently, their use of religion appears as an integral part of that experience; McCahon, Fomison and Brown portray spirituality unique to New Zealand. Clairmont, on the hand, had concerns far removed from this experience: "[H]is romance with the European tradition has kept, and keeps, Clairmont out of the mainstream of New Zealand painting. He has never been seduced by 'Pacific light' nor 'indigenous landscape', instead he has persevered with what was initially a consciously anti-Pacific approach to painting".[351]

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[346] Ibid, p.214.
[347] TJ McNamara, Intense Life Caught in Paintings, *The New Zealand Herald,* 20th July 1978.
[348] Hamish Keith, *The Development of Art in New Zealand,* 1969, p.3.
[349] James Ross (ed.), *New Zealand Modernism - Expressionism and Figurativism,* 1996, p.19.
[350] Gregory O'Brien, *Nigel Brown*, 1991, p.13.
[351] Stephen Ellis, Myth and Magic, *Elva Bett Gallery Newsletter, no.15,* September 1979, no pagination.

New Zealand art historical understandings of expressionism and 'New Zealand painting' left Clairmont at a double disadvantage. Because he did not portray the distinctive New Zealand experience, the religious meaning in his work has been neglected. This was compounded by interpretations of expressionism which restricted analysis of Clairmont's work to the style, not its content.

Clairmont's use of religion consisted of two parts: the visual and the spiritual. The former refers to the particular symbols and icons Clairmont portrayed (for example: the Cross, the Virgin Mary, and Buddha). In themselves, these signifiers of religion do not contain the beliefs of the artist. For example, an artist may paint a crucifix as protest *against* Christianity or even attempt to divorce the crucifix from any religious significance (as did Francis Bacon). The visual aspects must be viewed in relation to the artist's spirituality and motivations. In the case of Clairmont, spirituality played an important role in his work but derived chiefly from his interests in psychology, drugs and art history. His personal ties to Catholicism also affected his spirituality but, as mentioned above, this association with organised religion was comparatively weak. Consequently, theories essential to Christianity provide a point of departure, from which psychoanalysis, drug theory and art history follow. Clairmont's use of religious symbolism and iconography is a manifestation of his interest in these four areas.

As discussed in chapter three, Christianity is based on the principle of an earthly "empirical reality" and a heavenly "supra-empirical segment of reality".[352] This basis is common to each of the religions which fascinated Clairmont. In Judaism, "the Maharal (most venerated teacher and Rabbi) held two contradictory principles, which he tried to reconcile: there was a 'horizontal' or 'human' power in the form of science, creativity, tolerance and doubt in confrontation with God's absolute 'vertical' power, reducing man to dust and insignificance".[353] Similarly, "Esoteric Buddhism was involved with bridging the gap between the phenomenal world of the senses and the higher, absolute

[352] M. Hill, quoted in Nola Ker, *Religion and Society in Interaction in New Zealand,* 1984, p.vi.
[353] David Zane Mairowitz and Robert Crumb, *Introducing Kafka,* 1993, 1997, p.9.

world without form".[354] Both *Moslem Virgin* **(figure 6)** and *Our Lady* **(figure 31)** imply the Catholic belief in a transcending realm. The oak and telegraph poles in *Moslem Virgin* symbolise Christ's presence and his crucifixion. Similarly, the three lilies in *Our Lady* symbolise the Immaculate Conception. The focal point of each work is a woman but her *role* as the mother of Christ, reinforced by the symbolism, suggests hyperreality. By extension, when Clairmont used the Star of David in *Fireplace* (see chapter two, **figure 9**) and Buddha in *Buddha Vietnam* **(figure 2)**, he was not only referring to the Second World War and Vietnam War respectively, he was also referring to the "absolute power" of Judaism and the "absolute world without form" of Buddhism.

Robert Olson contends that the division between human and superhuman, pivotal to organised religion, has Platonic origins: "Although the dualism of creator and creature replaces the dualism of Being and Becoming, the creator retains all the properties of Platonic ideas (immutability, self-sufficiency, and eternity), while his creatures are invested with all the properties of objects in Plato's world of Becoming (mutability, dependency and finitude). And, as in Plato, salvation from the ills to which all flesh is heir can come only through a relationship to a reality which transcends the world".[355] Olson mentions two important factors which govern the relationship between the divine and the human: the former created the latter and is therefore its superior; and the characteristics of each are diametrically opposed - the imperfections of humanity are countered by the perfection of a higher being. In fact, it is this perfection which serves as an idealised model, 'raising' the believer to a higher plane of existence.

Freudian psychoanalysis redefined the dualism of creator and creature as that of father and son: "Man makes the forces of nature not simply into the images of men with whom he can associate as his equals - that wouldn't do justice to the overpowering impression they make on him - but he gives them the characteristics of the father, making them into gods, thereby following not only

[354] Robert E Fisher, *Buddhist Art and Architecture,* 1993, 1996, p.17.
[355] Robert G Olson, *An Introduction to Existentialism,* 1962, p.8.

an infantile, but also, as I have tried to show, a phylogenetic prototype".[356] The merging of psychoanalysis with Christianity is visible in the Clairmont works *Our Lady* and *The Holy Family* **(figure 34)**, both discussed in chapter four. Clairmont blended his identities as son, father and lover (as demonstrated by his relationship to Thelma, Orlando and Rachel), with the Trinity of Christ, God and the Holy Spirit. He has superimposed the psychoanalytical interpretation onto the Christian model.

Several examples demonstrate the reinterpretation of religious phenomena within a psychoanalytical context, all of which are visible in either Clairmont's theories on art, his identity as an artist, or his work. The psychoanalytical concept of the unconscious shares certain traits with the soul; both suggest a "higher purpose", "detach[ment] from the body", and a "superior intelligence".[357] In chapter six, it was shown that the prophet or visionary stripped of religious significance within the scientific context of the twentieth century became the lunatic or "madman". As demonstrated in chapter three, pantheism ("God is everything and everything is God"[358]) was reinterpreted by psychologists as anthropomorphism.[359] Symbolism, once a language of religious meaning, became for psychoanalysts a means of interpreting the unconscious unleashed in dreams. Each of these redefinitions reflects the shift from the macrocosm of space to the microcosm of the individual. The essence of religion remains untouched, however, because the unconscious fulfills the role of a power beyond human comprehension or consciousness.

Drug culture, which arose approximately sixty years after the advent of psychoanalysis, is an interesting blend of psychology and religion, which suited Clairmont's established fascination with each. From religion, drug culture adopted the concepts of enlightenment and transcendence and followed quasi-religious rituals of taking "sacraments".[360] Drug use was justified as a religious activity by Leary, Huxley, and Ginsberg (see chapter one). Drugs were also

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[356] Sigmund Freud, quoted in Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, The Sacred and The Arts,* 1986, p.30.
[357] Ibid, p.32.
[358] Michael Levine, *Pantheism, A Non-theistic Concept of Deity,* 1994, p.1.
[359] Aniela Jaffé, Symbolism in the Visual Arts, in Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols,* 1964, 1972, p.254.

viewed as a means of going deeper into the unconscious: "[the] psychedelic experience might be described briefly as the experience of states of awareness or consciousness profoundly different from the usual waking consciousness... consciousness expands to take in the contents of deep, ordinarily inaccessible regions of the psyche".[361] Huxley, one of the most committed supporters of drug use as religious experience, was not immune to the influence of psychoanalysis; he argued: "... the world described in popular religion, these other worlds are simply descriptions of visionary experiences that men (*sic*) have projected from the inside into the universe".[362] Clairmont assimilated the theories of the drug gurus mentioned above. His Christian upbringing predisposed him to the ceremony of drug culture and his exposure to Freudian theory was compatible with the belief that drugs allowed exploration of the unconscious.

The division between an observable reality and an obscure hyper-reality, which Clairmont sought in his work originated with religion. Psychoanalysis relabelled Christian terminology but the principle remained the same. Drug culture combined both religion and psychoanalysis. Certain analogies can be made across these three diverse areas of Clairmont's interest. For example, drugs were considered a bridge between realities. The psychoanalytical equivalent is dreaming, which supposedly offers an insight into the unconscious; the religious equivalent is prayer, yet another means of transcending the earthly plane. Clairmont was well read on drug theory and obviously believed in the principle of transcendence and "those submerged realities behind and beyond normal consciousness".[363] He was also familiar with psychoanalytical and Surrealist interpretations of dreams and must have recognised the parallel in drug use. It is only the overtly religious aspects which are of least relevance to Clairmont. It is in the extensive and covert network of associations which bound Clairmont to religion via psychology, drugs and art that his personal spirituality lies.

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[360] Martin Edmond, *Chemical Evolution, Drugs and Art Production 1970-1980,* 1997, p.12.
[361] Robert Masters and Jean Houston, *Psychedelic Art,* 1968, p.17.
[362] Aldous Huxley, Visionary Experience (1961), in Michael Horowitz and Cynthia Palmer (eds.), *Moksha: Writings on Psychedelia and Visionary Experience, 1931-1963,* 1980, p.205.
[363] Philip Clairmont, *An Exercise in Perception,* 1970, no pagination.

Art made visible the dualism of religion, as Mircea Eliade explains: "Every religious expression in art represents an encounter between man (*sic*) and the divine. Such encounters may be, on the one hand, a personal religious experience; or on the other, a religious perception of the world, the discovery that the world is a divine work, the creation of the Gods".[364] This principle also extended to Eastern religions: "The greatest Buddhist art balanced the two worlds, bringing a spiritual depth to physical appearances that blended the two into an art of profound range and expression".[365] Symbolism was the means by which artists "encountered" the divine (the artistic equivalent of drugs, dreams and prayer): "The symbol translates a human situation into cosmological terms; and reciprocally, more precisely, it discloses the interdependence between the structures of human existence and cosmic structures... the symbol makes the concrete object *explode* by disclosing dimensions which are not given in immediate experience".[366] The importance of symbolism in Clairmont's work has been demonstrated repeatedly throughout this thesis: the Buddha in *Buddha Vietnam*; the telegraph poles, stigmata, and oak seedling in *Moslem Virgin;* the mirror and violets in *Butterfly Mirror with Violet Flowers;* the lightbulb and ceiling beams in *Light source;* the lilies and Renaissance Virgin in *Our Lady of the Flowers;* and the Cross in *Self-Portrait at 33.* Clairmont used symbolism in the manner discussed above: to disclose other realities. Again, this is consistent with the 'human versus divine' division in organised religion, subsequent psychological reinterpretations and, several decades later, drug theory.

Not surprisingly, Clairmont's extensive art historical knowledge and fascination with his favourite artists also reinforced his belief in fragmented realities. Werner Haftmann, for example, explains Kandinsky's theories on art: "these ideas did not revolve exclusively around 'art' but were embedded in a religious intimation of an encompassing being, at the centre of which, between the earthly things of nature and the transcendent realities above them, stood man (*sic*), endowed with antennae that enabled him to enter into communication with

[364] Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, The Sacred and The Arts,* 1986, p.55.
[365] Robert E Fisher, *Buddhist Art and Architecture,* 1993, 1996, p.13.
[366] Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, The Sacred and The Arts,* 1986, p.13.

the whole".[367] Likewise, Ewald Rathke drew a parallel between Beckmann and Dix (who came to prominence following the First World War) and the Expressionists of Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter: "What they all have in common is the endeavour to transform the pictorial representation of reality in such a way as to make visible the concealed reality that lies beyond".[368] The French artist Jean Dubuffet said the following of his work *The Group of Four Trees,* 1972, "The result (at least, this is the way it works for me) is an awareness of the illusory character of the world which we think of as real, and to which we give the name of the real world... this reality is, in truth, only one option collectively adopted, to interpret the world around us - one option among an infinity of equally legitimate possibilities".[369] Dubuffet's comments recall those of Clairmont which opened this chapter. Dubuffet's anti-establishment, almost anarchic art theories were known to Clairmont; he quoted Dubuffet in *An Exercise in Perception* (see appendix). As with the other artists mentioned above, Clairmont was drawn to the principles which underscored the art, as well as the resulting imagery. Consequently, the stylistic hallmarks of Expressionism are visible in his work, but that is a product of the interest Clairmont shared with these artists in alternative realities and the means necessary to reveal those realities to the viewer.

These highly spiritual approaches to art incorporated the language of psychoanalysis but retained a belief in 'the other'. Herbert Read wrote in *The Meaning of Art,* 1931, required reading whilst Clairmont was at the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, that "The artist, whether poet or mystic or painter, does not seek a symbol for what is clear to the understanding and capable of discursive exposition; he (*sic*) realises that life, especially the mental life, exists on two planes, one definite and visible in outline and detail, the other - perhaps the greater part of life - submerged, vague, indeterminate. A human being drifts through time like an iceberg, only partially floating above the level of consciousness".[370] Extending Read's comments to Clairmont's work, this may

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[367] Werner Haftmann, *Painting in the Twentieth Century, vol.1,* 1961, 1965, 1968, p.118.
[368] Ewald Rathke, Magic Realism and the Metaphysical, in Massimo Carrà, *Metaphysical Art,* 1968, 1971, p.181.
[369] Jean Dubuffet, *Asphyxiating Culture and Other Writings,* 1988, p.116.
[370] Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art,* 1931, 1936, 1943, 1945, 1946... 1959, p.170.

explain the juxtaposition of domestic interiors with religious iconography (discussed in chapter four). Via symbolism, Clairmont could portray simultaneously two planes of reality. The conscious, waking, rational world of domestic life depicted in works such as *Butterfly Mirror* **(figure 11)** and *Light source* **(figure 13)** is revealed as a facade, unmasked by Clairmont with the assistance of perception-altering drugs. Whether this 'true' hidden reality is from within the individual (the unconscious) or beyond seems to fluctuate.

In more recent art history, Clairmont's outsider status has changed due to the popularity of Neo-Expressionism and the support of art historians such as Warwick Brown. Of the period 1960 to 1990 in New Zealand painting, Brown has argued in the last five years, "if there is a dominant trend, it is towards expressionism, of both the figurative and abstract kind".[371] He also claimed that Clairmont's work, along with that of Fomison, Brown, Harris and Trevor Moffitt, "anticipated by a decade the international revival of expressionism, and by and large did it better".[372] Renewed attention has not necessarily led to a more thorough examination of Clairmont's oeuvre, but has resulted in unprecedented acceptance by the status quo, as Neil Roberts demonstrates: "[Alan] Pearson has witnessed during the past 46 years the lionising of artist's such as Colin McCahon, Tony Fomison, Toss Woollaston, Ralph Hotere and Philip Clairmont and their election to the pantheon of gods on New Zealand's Olympus by the collective body of artists, theorists and academics who admire individuality so much, as long as it is held within the collective mind".[373] Associating Clairmont with these other artists is a major assertion. McCahon, Fomison, Woollaston and Hotere have well-established reputations as ground-breaking and influential artists; adding Clairmont to this list suggests that he had an equally profound impact on the shape of New Zealand's art history. Clairmont should be categorised with these artists; not by Roberts's justification, but because of his shared fascination with religion and spirituality and its depiction in his art.

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[371] Warwick Brown, *100 New Zealand Paintings*, 1995, 1997, p.vii.
[372] Ibid, p.x.
[373] Neil Roberts, *Heaven and Blood: Painting and Drawing by Alan Pearson 1959-1999,* 1999, p.10.

Clairmont's religious imagery is both a commentary on social issues (war, materialism, fascism, redundancy of the church) and a personal exploration of identity (as he drew parallels between himself and his family, and religious icons). He used religion to convey themes such as birth and death, suffering and resurrection, presented symbolically and often within the familiar context of the home. He gained inspiration for such imagery from numerous diverse influences, ranging from underground comics, rock musicians and drug culture through to Catholic iconography, Freudian psychoanalysis and the history of 'high art'. Clairmont maintained the 'spiritual' aspects of religion, (specifically, a belief in realities beyond normal states of consciousness) and rejected the structure and hierarchy of the church (of less interest perhaps because of its susceptibility to human shortcomings). His interest in spirituality was supported by drug theory, psychoanalytical concepts such as the unconscious, and the art of the German Expressionists and Romantics who had a strong mystical component to their work; his rejection of the church was probably a consequence of his involvement with hippy culture, his socialist sympathies, and interest in the cynical work of Francis Bacon. The resulting imagery challenges the viewer with a unique and at times irreverent look at religion in the twentieth century - fundamental to Clairmont's work and before now too often neglected within New Zealand's art history.

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Appendix: An Exercise in Perception

By Philip Clairmont, submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree Diploma of Fine Arts (Honours), University of Canterbury, 1970.

Foreword

Our culture is based on an
Enormous confidence in language
- and especially the written
language; and belief in its
ability to translate and elaborate
thought. That appears to me
misapprehension. I have the
impression, language is a
rough, very rough stenography,
a system of algebraic signs, very
rudimentary, which impairs
thought instead of helping it.
Written language seems to me,
A bad instrument. As an
Instrument of expression, it
Seems to deliver only a dead
Reminant (*sic*) of thought, more or
less as clinkers (*sic*) from the fire.
As an instrument of elaboration
It seems to overload thought and
Falsify it.

.....Jean Dubuffet.

This thesis provides for sensory and visual appreciation rather than intellectual gratification (thus the emphasis on visual rather than written work). It comprises of a series of drawings, covering *some* aspects of one particular interior ... in this instance, my living room – an immediate environment.

The drawings are essentially a visual record of sensory thinking, emotional and free-form imaginative interpretation of common place objects. The drawing follows a sequence, both chronologically and in thought development towards painting in which the experience gained of the room crystallises (*sic*) in paint, size and colour adding dimension. The drawings should perform a dual role, one of providing a direct link with unconscious creative processes, and one of showing a developing awareness of the vital lifeforces and movements that motivate a painting and validate the act of creating it.

A variety of techniques have been used, each in its turn revealing some significant facet of the interior.

Mixed media drawings predominate, for this media with its own unique qualities, is capable of providing a bridge ... an interlocking of concept and technique where image and media are inseparable.

The subject chosen for this thesis is the interior of a room and its myriad aspects. When experienced subjectively it can appear as an outer protection or barrier for inner turmoil, providing security, shelter and privacy, or the direct opposite, four walls unnaturally imprisoning that which should be free.

Objectively it provides a startling array of forms, shapes and textures, both functional and non-functional, rigid and organic. The visual tensions influence and condition the actions and thoughts of the human figure within this environment.

A room contains within its four walls residue of human thought, actions and emotions, a visual catalyst of memories and associations; past and present. A room is in a constant state of evolution expressing itself in movements from light and dark (*sic*) – a place where time and space can be immeasurable.

I have tried using a variety of means: signs and symbols, dots, dashes, line and tone to capture at once the stationary together with the transitory nature of observed appearances.

I have dwelt on and emphasised those ambiguities which have arisen out of the process of creating an image and may reveal something of another reality ... of those submerged realities behind appearances and beyond normal consciousness. The language of an artist is able to cast a glimmer of light on those essential truths ... truths which normally allude civilised man."

Prospects...

These drawings are partly conscious and partly unconscious in pointing towards a specific direction. Drawing that attempts to deprive the "ego" of part of ones (*sic*) "own" ie. Personality, in order to reveal something more significant ... the innate personality of the objects ... objects that are the influencing factors on our own personalities.

The more free art can be from individual personality "hang-ups', the more accessible it will be for others. The painters (*sic*) importance is now being reduced to a minimum and the conception of talent abolished, bringing about an awareness of true creative freedom and of conceived potential, not only from the creator, but more important from the creative impulse within the people as a whole.

A purposeful, unconditional loss of identity, attempted here may pave the way for unlimited identification, which resolves every isolation of subject and object in the universal rythm (*sic*) of open existence.

"I have no doubt that by yielding naturally to the business of subduing appearances and upsetting the existing relationships of "realities" it is helping with a smile on its lips to hasten the general crisis of consciousness due in our time."

.... Inspiration to Order, by Max Ernst.

NB: Two photographs and thirteen drawings accompany An Exercise in Perception. *Each drawing is presented with a brief description. These descriptions have been excluded from this appendix, as they are extraneous to the main body of the essay.*